The Assam Movement

and the

Construction of Assamese Identity

Gareth Price

A thesis submitted to the University of Bristol in accordance with the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Politics, Faculty of Social Science.

November 1997

Abstract

This thesis argues that the politics of the Assam Movement of the 1980's exemplifies the use of identity as a consolidating tool. Locating the Assam Movement within a broad-based historical perspective, the study examines theories of ethnicity but finds current explanations insufficient in explaining the mobilization of a particular Assamese cultural identity during this period.

Current views of state and society within India argue that contemporary divisions derive from discourses and structures imposed by the British and the nationalist movement. The thesis argues that methods of governance, social conditions and economic structures within India have derived from, or have been manufactured in response to, British assumptions reflected in colonial methods of rule. This has encouraged the articulation and construction of localized identities in northeast India at the expense of a national homogenization. This is demonstrated through a study of social, political, economic and religious developments under colonial rule and their manipulation and justification by both Assamese and national Indian elites.

The thesis will further demonstrate the manipulation of selective historical events to construct a contemporary Assamese community. Despite temporal and genealogical differences between the historical events and the contemporary community, this does not prevent myths relating to territory being used to consolidate a community inhabiting the same territory.

Through examining this complex dynamic and the resultant accommodation and constraints enforced by the centre on the sub-nationalist identity, the thesis explains the rise of the *Asom Gana Parishad* and raises issues regarding the basis of nationalism within the Indian state, the possibilities of devolution and implications for political order within post-colonial states.

Acknowledgements

The number of people who have assisted me in the completion of this thesis are too many to mention. A debt is owed to many within the Department of Politics at the University of Bristol.

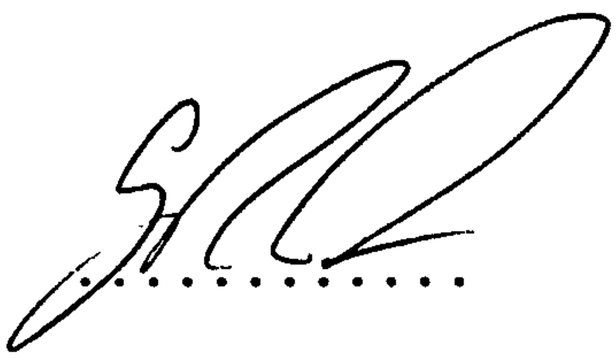
Special thanks are due to the supervision of Vernon Hewitt whose faith in both the subject and the approach of this thesis encouraged its completion.

My fieldwork in India was eased by the hospitality of the Ghoshals in Guwahati and Calcutta, and Simon Scarff in New Delhi. The proof-reading of the thesis by Lucas Blasco-Bergau and my father was invaluable, as were the frequent discussions of things Indian with Andrew Wyatt and John Zavos.

My largest debts are to Victoria Dolphin and my mother and father upon whose constant support I have relied.

Author's Declaration

This thesis is entirely the work of the author and has not been submitted for a degree at this or any other University



Gareth Price

The views expressed in this thesis are those of the author and do not represent the views of the University of Bristol

Table of Contents

Abbreviations

All Assam Students Union	A.A.S.U.
All Bodo Students Union	A.B.S.U.
All Party Hill Leaders' Conference	A.P.H.L.C.
Asom Gana Parishad	A.G.P.
Assam Sahitya Sabha	A.S.S.
Assam Jatiyatabadi Dal	A.J.D.
Autonomous State Demand Council	A.S.D.C.
Bharatiya Janata Party	B.J.P.
Bharatiya Lok Dal	B.L.D.
Communist Party of India	C.P.I.
Communist Party of India (Marxist)	C.P.I.(M)
Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist)	C.P.I.(ML)
Constituent Assembly Debates	C.A.D.
Economic and Political Weekly	E.P.W.
Garo National Council	G.N.C.
Khasi Jaintia Durbar	K.J.D.
Kisan Mazdoor Praja Party	K.M.P.P.
Member of Legislative Assembly	M.L.A.
Member of the Lok Sabha	M.L.S.
North East Frontier Agency	N.E.F.A.
Nutan Asom Gana Parishad	N.A.G.P.
Other Backward Castes	O.B.C.

Purbanchaliya Loka Parishad	P.L.P.
Plains Tribal Council of Assam	P.T.C.A.
Praja Socialist Party	P.S.P.
Purbanchaliya Lok Parishad	P.L.P.
Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh	R.S.S.
Revolutionary Communist Party of India	R.C.P.I.
Samyukta Socialist Party	S.S.P.
Socialist Unity Centre of India	S.U.C.I.
Surrendered United Liberation Front of Assam	S.U.L.F.A.
Tribal Union Party	T.U.P.
Ujani Assam Rajya Parishad	U.A.R.P.
United Liberation Front of Assam	U.L.F.A.
United Minorities Front	U.M.F.
United Reservations Movement Council of Assam	U.R.M.C.A.

Note on Spellings

Throughout the thesis consistency has been attempted, despite the spellings of some names changing during the periods under discussion. Thus Guwahati is used throughout the thesis, although the more anglicized Gauhati was officially used until 1979. Similarly Shankardeva, rather than Shankardeb or Shankardev, is used, although all three are used by different writers.

A thesis of this nature suffers from a major terminological problem relating to the terms Assam and Assamese. The term Assam generally refers only to the present-day state of Assam and the term northeast is used to refer to the states of Assam, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Manipur. However, the British used the term Assam to describe this region as a whole and discussions of the state of Assam under colonial rule reflect this.

At risk of appearing tautological, the term indigenous Assamese refers only to the core Assamese group; those whose membership of the Assamese group is unchallenged. That is; Assamese speaking, Vaishnavite Hindus. Some early Muslim immigrants would also be included in this definition but specifically excluded are those whose membership varies temporally. Most important of these are tribals, tea plantation workers and Bengali Muslims and Hindus.

Introduction

Since 1978, the state of Assam has experienced a near complete breakdown in ethnic accommodation. Political parties are seen to attract support on the basis of localized cultural allegiances at the expense of any inclusive state-wide, regional or national identity. This has resulted in excluded groups utilizing alternative cultural tools to construct opposing identities, reinforcing this polarization.

This thesis argues that identity politics is predicated on constructing a difference with the Other. The use of historic events, both to construct cultural groups and to justify relationships with alternative groups, encourages other groups to adopt similar methods for self-protection. The thesis will demonstrate the manner in which cultural artifacts have been used to construct and consolidate a specific Assamese identity.

The object is to demonstrate the process through which cultural communities may be used by elites as the prime means of organization for, and the focus of, political demands. Furthermore, it will investigate the method by which cultural groups develop into "existence". That is, how they develop into a recognizable format with a self-identifying, stigmatized membership and shared ways of behaviour, such that they may be used as the channels through which political demands are articulated.

Through examining the use of myth, the role of the Other and the political environment, the thesis will explore the construction of a specific Assamese identity, to the point at which a particular cultural elite is able to dominate the state apparatus. The power of this elite

derives from its claims to represent the Assamese community within the state structure and its attempts to extract resources from the centre and from other groups within the state for "its" community.

It will be argued that the creation of the Assamese group involved the propagation of a particular conception of Assamese society by an Assamese elite. This conception focused on vague notions of the need to protect Assamese culture, primarily through reference to linguistic minoritization, but these ideas could only become dominant when more deprived members of the Assamese community felt that they too would benefit from articulating this identity. Thus the rise of the Assam Movement equally reflects the decline of Congress Party authority within the state.

By definition the thesis is a historical work but it does not attempt to write a comprehensive and definitive history of Assam. Rather, it aims to focus on those "stories" whose re-articulation has acted as a catalyst for identity consolidation and which feature prominently both in contemporary literature and in public consciousness as "cultural markers" of the Assamese community.

The implications of this work are twofold. Firstly, although "sons of the soil" movements in Assam are clearly related to territory, conceptions of being Assamese are justified using historical and cultural signifiers which do not require any "imagined" familial, blood relationship with those communities whose historical memories are articulated. The Assamese community utilizes historic myths related to the

territory of Assam, rather than necessarily imagining that their own ancestors were involved in these events. That is, that they share the territory is sufficient for the propagation of shared memories.

The second implication is that cultural identities can never be removed as potential focal points for any sub-nationalist political movement. The representation of differing dialects, religious practices or social structures may, if these differences are portrayed as being historic, result in the division of a group previously assumed to be culturally homogenous. As long as any potentially stigmatizable cultural differences exist, given a conducive political environment, ethnic groups can be created, through appropriation of history to emphasize difference.

It is important to note that this is in no way an ethnic "reawakening". Rather, it is an instrumentalist construction of a historically justified but politically new community.

The elections of February 1983 witnessed widespread unrest throughout the state of Assam. Estimates of those killed vary between 3,000 (S. Baruah 1986: 1184), 4,000 (Hazarika 1995: 145) and 7,000 (Hussain 1993: 10), although some commentators have placed the figures as high as 10,000 with hundreds of thousands (Rafiabadi 1988: 7) or even half a million (J. Singh 1984: 1066) losing their homes. This event marked the breakdown of any cultural accommodation that had previously existed within the state but which had gradually been eroded since the early 1970's. The growth of a new militancy amongst and between almost all stigmatized communities within the

state was witnessed not just in relation to illegal immigrants but with regard to indigenous Assamese communities.

The *All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad* (All Assam Peoples' Struggle Council), or Assam Movement, formed in 1979, entered into protracted negotiations with the centre with regards both to economic problems within the state and the flow of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. The resulting Assam Accord of 1985 paved the way for elections in the state Legislative Assembly which were convincingly won by the *Asom Gana Parishad* (Assam Peoples' Council) (A.G.P.), the party political wing of the Assam Movement. Corruption, inexperience and a hostile central government resulted in a return to President's Rule in 1989. Disillusionment with the A.G.P. enabled the Congress (I) Party to return to power in 1991.

Rising militancy from the United Liberation Front of Assam (U.L.F.A.) and the clearly divisive policies of Congress (I) Chief Minister Hiteshwar Saikia's government in Assam enabled a more experienced A.G.P. to return to power in the Legislative Assembly elections of 1996 on a platform opposed to the Congress Party and immigration and supporting economic development within the state. Claims for Assamese independence exist but, as the A.G.P. has been better accommodated by the non-Congress centre, these have declined. The Assam Movement had achieved the only viable option available to it; state domination within the existing framework and a guarantee that culturally based politics would dominate the politics of the state for at least the foreseeable future.

This thesis explains these events as the result of an external environment conducive to the formation of cultural communities as the means through which political demands are articulated. The manner by which indigenous Assamese elites have used historic myths to construct and then consolidate a particular high-caste Hindu Assamese identity to the exclusion of more conciliatory and inclusive interpretations of Assamese identity will be demonstrated.

This thesis seeks to locate the events in Assam from 1978 to the present within a historical framework. Attempts to secure political goals and control over scarce social goods are liable to be made through the representation of cultural similarity, stressing linguistic and religious difference from outsiders, and consolidating this through the articulation of historical events. It will be argued that this has been encouraged both by British policies in the northeast and the manner of governance in the post-Independence Indian state stressing community rights, rather than notions of individual citizenship.

Furthermore, this thesis will demonstrate how the concept of Assamese identity has been manipulated by elites for the purpose of resource allocation. Through basing economic demands on the grounds that the "indigenous" population, whose composition varies, have specific rights on the basis of territorial allegiance, they necessarily need to define this community through reference to other groups, thereby increasing division. Through an examination of the use of historical material, and the sub-texts and implications thereof, it will be

shown that debates regarding Assamese identity are conducted in large part through reference to historic myth and changing definitions of the Other. This in turn affects individual's self-perception.

A distinction is assumed between politics within Assam before and after the A.G.P. gained control of the Legislative Assembly. The construction of the cultural identity can be manufactured in opposition to other political parties which are perceived to gain support from other communities but the point at which power has been achieved marks the stage at which the demands of rule, within a democratic state such as India, are such that new methods of maintaining support are necessary (see Mitra 1996: 31).

This thesis is divided into three sections. The first two chapters outline the theoretical position taken with regard to identity creation, investigating ethnic identities and theories of the Indian state. The following three chapters examine the development of a specific Assamese cultural identity, through a demonstration of the imposition of cultural identities by the colonial administration and the articulation of historic differences by the contemporary Assam Movement. The final chapter contextualizes the particular political events from 1978 until 1997 in Assam. It demonstrates the "success" of certain non-inclusionary, localized identities and the consequent development of a particular, cultural, political party; the A.G.P..

Chapter One presents a comprehensive literature review regarding theories of ethnicity, tracing early anthropological accounts, the assumptions of

modernization theorists and Marxists and post-modern examinations of identity. This chapter will argue that many of the commonly-held assumptions regarding ethnicity, for example, that ethnic identities increase their salience in certain situations, that they can be managed or that national identities can co-opt trappings of ethnic identities, imply that ethnic identities are ever present, primordial features.

Rather than assuming that, in certain circumstances, ethnic identities *reassert* themselves, this thesis will argue that if a group of people sharing certain characteristics, such as language, are exploited by a categorically different group, perhaps speakers of a different language, then the exploited group will articulate their grievances through the language of cultural difference. To consolidate this linguistically and spatially distinct cultural group, manufactured or selective histories can provide justification for organization around these stigmatizing features. It is therefore argued that the cultural traits exist before notions of the cultural community but that their expression as cultural markers of a community reflects a political project.

Chapter One concludes with an examination of two features necessary to "create" an ethnic community; a stigmatizable Other and myths available to be articulated to consolidate this difference.

Chapter Two explores theories of Indian nationalism and assesses the relationship between secularism and religion in India. Despite the tradition of state involvement in religious affairs, dominant notions of

secular democracy after Independence represented a qualitative shift. The utilization of Hindu icons by the Congress Party from the late 1970's and the growth of the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (B.J.P.) demonstrate the failure of secular ideals in a predominantly Hindu democracy. This questions both indigenous Indian interpretations of Hinduism and western notions of secularism.

The articulation of over-lapping identities, which have clearly not disappeared through "modernization", recurs as caste and linguistic cleavages are dealt with through the management and preferment of political, social and economic rights. This confusion over the nature of citizenship in India is reinforced by rights given to certain groups within the secular state. For example, the arbitration of personal law disputes by religious elites was legitimized by the state, whilst tribal groups were given preferential treatment on the basis of community membership.

The granting of rights on the basis of cultural stigmas has enabled various particular localized identities in Assam to be reinforced by the very measures which were intended to reduce their importance. Caste, tribal, linguistic and religious identities co-exist in the northeast as nowhere else in India and the argument that Assam is a microcosm of Indian society (see section 5.4), is increasingly discredited. The virulence of the claims of difference within the region implies a major failure of the national identity to reinforce itself through difference. Furthermore, the system of governance implies that other parts of society need to be accepted by others as a community to gain political and social

rights. For example, if statehood is desired, language must be emphasized, if reservations, then backwardness must be stressed.

Clearly other political systems may well have produced similar outcomes. However, it is the argument of this thesis that the continuing emphasis on groups, rather than individuals, within a liberal political framework, has failed to produce an indigenous form of nationalism that could act as a primary identity. Nor has the Indian state been fully able to regard its citizens as individuals rather than as members of a cultural group. Instead, in large part through necessity, paradoxically the state has been forced to adopt a framework inherited from British rule as a means to eliminate the inequalities of colonial rule.

Thus, despite being explicitly opposed to the Indian state, the growth of the Assam Movement was implicitly encouraged by the state. Furthermore, much of the language of the Assam Movement is synonymous with the language of the Indian nationalist movement. If the origins of the present Indian state can be seen in pre-Independence debates, the failure of the national identity to consolidate itself in the northeast can be argued to derive from the region's transitory involvement in the Independence struggle which in turn resulted from the prevailing method of colonial rule.

Chapter Three will highlight certain historical metaphors which have been utilized to suggest that the Assamese are separate from mainstream Indian culture. The co-opting of Ahom history as the history of the early Assamese will be demonstrated and this reflects the

argument that the truth of various claims is less important than their popular acceptance.

The fact that, for example, early immigrants to Assam are argued to have adapted to Assamese culture, when articulated by contemporary elites, clearly contrasts with later migrants who are not perceived to have "adapted". This general construction allows the Assamese group to be (relatively) open. Groups which are seen to adopt Assamese culture and support Assamese elites, such as tea garden labourers, can be accepted as being Assamese. If these groups later appear too powerful, as with Bengali Muslims, then the definition of the Assamese community can be altered by Assamese elites to exclude them.

Thus, despite a changing membership, it will be argued that leadership of the Assam Movement is in the hands of certain indigenous Assamese elites, who have the power to define membership through articulating specific myths.

Chapter Four continues this examination of myths utilized by the Assam Movement but, given the continuities between methods of governance before and after Independence, begins to trace the processes which led to these myths being articulated in the 1980's.

Colonial observations of the inherent traits of the Assamese affected Assamese self-perception and agency. Attempts to repudiate certain ideas, such as Assamese indolence, were hindered by the colonial imposition of structures based on the "truth" of cultural stigmas. Thus British impressions enforced a different distribution of power within the state. For example, Assamese economic

power was reduced through the introduction of large-scale immigrant labour whilst political power was reduced by the use of Assam as a bulwark against the Bengali nationalist movement.

Chapter Five will examine the situation after Independence in Assam and the increasing articulation of cultural signifiers by Assamese elites. The emphasis on language as the main marker of the Assamese community allows economically weak migrants, who are more likely to adopt the language, to join the Assamese group. Simultaneously, those migrants who are economically powerful are much less likely to give up their language and are thus excluded.

The focus upon the cultural difference of the northeast from the rest of India provides the basis for a particular geographical identity based upon allegiance to the land, rather than shared cultural traits. This specifically excludes Bengalis and Marwaris who are perceived to have an extra-territorial attachment to Bengal, Bangladesh or Rajasthan. Suggestions that the Bengalis would be accepted if they renounced their extra-territorial ties can be made in the knowledge that simply by being defined as "Bengalis" recognizes and implies that there is a potential extra-territorial affiliation.

State reorganization allowed certain Assamese elites to assert their political hegemony within what they perceived to be a linguistic state. However, their inability to achieve economic dominance was highlighted by this new dichotomy. The manner of Congress Party rule in Assam, relying on a coalition of Bengalis, Muslims, tea garden workers and rural areas, supported by votes

from illegal immigrants with occasional sweeteners to the indigenous Assamese, considerably increased resentment towards the Congress Party. Due to the heterogeneity of the various constituencies, this resentment could not be converted into electoral success by the early Assamese political parties.

Chapter Six will assess the growth of the Assam Movement and its development into a party political form; the A.G.P.. It will be argued that notions of identity and myth were vital to the success of this localized cultural movement. The simultaneous rise of the United Liberation Front of Assam will be attributed to the same causes; decades of socialization and elite emphasis on indigenous Assamese difference.

Through this perspective, it will be argued that culture is itself political; expressions of cultural difference are neither "false consciousness" nor primordial traits. Instead, they are politically motivated and understandable through an assessment of forms of governance within the region, which have encouraged political claims to be made through the articulation of community membership.

Chapter One

The Study of Ethnicity and Identity

1.0 Introduction

This chapter provides the framework within which the thesis as a whole is located. It establishes the specific theoretical problem to be addressed and explains the methodology to be used. It then turns to specific literature reviews concerning, firstly, approaches to the study of ethnicity in general before, secondly, more detailed explanations of the value of examining "historic myths and memories" and notions of the Other in the specific case of Assam. The third feature to be addressed, the political and institutional framework of the Indian particular, is examined in Chapter Two, which reviews theories of Indian nationalism and the Indian state and locates these in terms of the general review regarding ethnicity and nationalism in this chapter.

The initial examination of the secondary literature regarding ethnicity and identity will attempt to answer two basic questions; firstly, what is ethnicity and; secondly, what, if anything, distinguishes ethnicity from other forms of political mobilization? The approach taken, derived from the literature review, will be utilized throughout the thesis with reference to the Assam Movement. This will explain the method by which a particular name, Assam or Asamiya, has developed from a description of a geographical area into a representation of a particular ethnic category, utilized for political purposes, ascribing cultural values and defining membership of this group.

Section 1.2 explores the role of the Other in identity creation, assessing a diverse but complementary range of material including work by Edward Said and Ronald Inden. From this review, it will be argued that without a stigmatizable Other there is neither a purpose nor a possibility of consolidating any specific cultural identity.

The second feature of identity in Assam is the articulation by political elites of historic "myths and memories". Through a study of relevant literature, particularly *the Myth of the State* by Cassirer and Hobsbawm and Ranger's analysis of *the Invention of Tradition*, section 1.3 will argue that without these signifiers it is impossible for any cultural community to be consolidated. Conversely, if a political movement has a popular purpose, the usage of forgotten events to aid the construction of a community is possible.

1.1 Ethnicity, Nationalism and Identity

Through a historical account of the development of thought regarding ethnicity, this section will outline the different conclusions reached by various theorists. Throughout, the focus will be on the usefulness of the different views in providing a generic analytical category.

The relationship between ethnicity and nationalism is theoretically contested. Whilst some writers have argued that nationalism attempts to justify its existence through ethnic markers, others have assumed that whilst national identity is in some manner the "correct" form of allegiance, ethnicity is a bastardized, localized or backward version of this. This dichotomy recurs

throughout this thesis since the articulation of a sub-nationalist identity implies a failure of the national identity to secure acceptance.

Theories regarding ethnicity can broadly be placed within three intellectual traditions, although clearly some approaches do not fit neatly within such a classification. "Traditional" anthropological accounts have suggested a primordial basis for ethnic attachments, primarily supposing a racial, genetic basis for difference. The second approach, loosely termed modernity, includes both liberal modernization theorists and Marxists. The shared assumption is that development, in whatever format it takes, will lead to a decline in ethnic attachments. More recent approaches to nationalism, although coming to different conclusions, can also be placed in this school. As Gellner, Anderson and Smith, for instance, have argued, nationalism is a product of modernity in Western Europe and a reaction to this in the post-colonial world. The third approach, post-modernity, criticizes the previous meta-narratives, arguing that identity is contextual and more localized. It further argues the impossibility of fact and the consequent importance of representation as a consolidating feature of identity.[1]

It is the argument of this thesis that each of these views has something to offer the study of identities.

---

[1] This categorisation of the literature is not original. For example, Rogers (1994) defines primordialist, modernist and post-orientalist schools whilst Manor (1996) divides the literature between primordialist, instrumentalist and post-modern approaches.

However, through description and analysis of a comprehensive and representative sample of theories, it will be argued that questions relating to the salience of an ethnic identity or of problems at the boundary of a group's membership, explicitly suggest a primordial basis for the group's core. When this is not the case, the term ethnic loses any analytical utility.

Until relatively recently the study of ethnicity has, by and large, been ignored by social theorists outside of anthropology. As societies developed, it was assumed by both dominant schools, Marxism and liberalism, that "modern" culture would diffuse into all societies and that residual loyalties would be subsumed by class or national allegiances.

The term ethnicity was first used in 1953 by American sociologist David Riesman (Eriksen 1993: 3) but this usage derived from earlier investigations of identity and particularity within the social sciences, particularly anthropological investigations into tribal and racial characteristics. The term itself derived from the Greek *ethnos*, in turn derived from *ethnikos* (Eriksen 1993: 3).

> The Greek meaning implied;
>
> a sense of a number of people living together and acting together, though not necessarily belonging to the same clan or tribe... In other words, ethnos would appear to be more suited to cultural rather than biological or kinship differences. (A.D. Smith 1986: 21)

New Testament writers used the term "ethnic" to refer to Gentiles (A.D. Smith 1986: 21) and it was in the sense of heathen or pagan that it was used in English from the mid-fourteenth to the mid-nineteenth century.

Walker's dictionary of 1888 defines *ethnick* as "Heathen, Pagan, not Jewish, not Christian" and, although it began to refer to racial characteristics (Eriksen 1993: 4), even in 1933, the Oxford English Dictionary defined ethnic as "Heathendom, heathen superstition" (Quoted in D.P. Moynihan 1993: 11).

It is largely due to the anthropological method of analysis that recent writings on ethnicity in the social sciences have generally regarded ethnicity as something tangibly different from nationalism.

Whereas the Enlightenment encouraged ideas of human development, the early nineteenth century witnessed the growth of examinations of the progress of "civilisation", a much more Euro-centric notion. Anthropologists' assumptions were conditioned by ideas of;

> non-European "savages", who defined "civilisation" by contrast; ideas about the physical nature and differentiation of man, which raised the problem of universality, ideas about the nature of social order, which defined the specific content of civilisation. (Stocking 1987: 9)

These factors, the expansion of colonies and the resulting public interest in the well-being of indigenous people (Burton 1992: 181), particularly in Africa, coupled with Darwinist notions which were easily adapted to provide an justification for the apparently natural supremacy of certain "racial" groups over others, established the ground rules under which early anthropologists worked. Their focus thus encouraged a static view of their subjects of investigation which were invariably so-called "primitive" peoples.

Thus different groups were thought to possess different inherent traits. Groups could be classified scientifically and placed on an evolutionary scale. It

was this focus that guided anthropologists well into the twentieth century.

The backgrounds of early practitioners of anthropology provide a further context to the assumptions made. Many early studies were initiated either by missionaries[2] or by colonial administrators.[3] When the intended "modernizing" reforms of missionaries or officials failed, it is perhaps unsurprising that they characterized their subjects as both unchanging and unchangeable.

These primordial traits were seen to reveal themselves in physical artifacts, examinations of which legitimized claims made regarding the group as a whole. Tylor, for example, wrote in 1871;

> Just as the catalogue of all the species of plants and animals of a district represents its Flora and Fauna, so the list of all the items of the general life of a people represent that whole which we call its culture. (Tylor 1920: 8)

Furthermore, culture was accepted as a given. The culture of a group could be derived from its particular circumstances but, once classified, legitimized the individuals as members of a particular group with certain inherent traits.[4] This enabled colonial powers to

---

[2] For example, Thomas Williams' study of Fiji in 1859 (cited in Stocking 1987: 87-92).

[3] Numerous examples include the investigation of *Polynesian Mythology* by Sir George Grey (cited in Stocking 1987: 81-87) and Mills' work on *the Rengma Nagas* (J.P. Mills 1937).

[4] The British notion of the existence of criminal castes, for instance. In the words of one official; "crime is their trade and they are born to it and must commit it" (Metcalf 1997: 122).

institutionalize these differences through granting political and economic rights on the basis of difference. Thus, even if the perceived traits were originally false, once imposed, the new discourse enforced them as "truth".

Anthropologists were able to make such claims primarily due to their focus on the physical aspects of a people which assumed linkages between culture and race. Thus, if the Assamese were perceived as being lazy due to their use of opium (see section 4.2), this was presumed to be a racial trait. Different tribes were seen to be at different stages of the evolutionary scale; hunter-gatherers, pastoralists and so on. Not until Richard Burton's work in the 1880's did cultural anthropology start to be seen as an important part of the discipline, capable of taking anthropology past anthropometry, the crude measurement of features of individuals (Inden 1986: 61-62), or photographing representative members of each tribe and classifying groups from this (Metcalf 1997: 117). Yet ideas of preserving tribal societies remained within both social and cultural anthropology due to the general empathy gained through field work.

Through this analysis ethnicity, in the form of tribalism, is tautologically seen as a pre-modern, racial structure, as distinct from nationalism, which is perceived to be a feature of modernity. Contemporary theorists are still unclear of links between race and ethnicity. Arguments have been made that race is a particular type of ethnicity (e.g. Van den Berghe 1983) or that it is one of a number of ascriptive categories which may, or may not, hinder group acceptance, in the same manner as command of a language (Eriksen 1993: 5).

Alternatively, Banton argues that the two are theoretically different; whereas race refers to the categorisation of people by outsiders, ethnicity refers to self-identification (Banton 1983: 106).

Studies of the structures of societies allowed for a shift from physical anthropology but the relationship to change within societies was still unclear. To what extent were the structures of groups traditional and to what extent were they constructed? Writing in 1923, Kroeber, one of the most important figures in American anthropology, gives an offensive description of this newly discovered difference, between social and physical anthropology;

> To the question why a Louisiana negro is black and thick-lipped, the answer is ready. He was born so. As dogs produce pups, and lions cubs, so negro springs from negro and Caucasian from Caucasian. We call the force heredity. The same negro is lazy by repute, easy going at his labour. Is this too an innate quality? Off-hand most of us would reply: Yes. He sings at his corn-hoeing more frequently than the white man across the fence. Is this also because of his heredity? "Of course: he is made so," might be a common answer: "Probably: why not?" a more cautious one. But now our negro is singing Suwanee River, which his great-grandfather in Africa assuredly did not... At these points heredity is displaced by tradition, nature by nurture. (Kroeber 1923: 2-3)

Indeed, colonial powers found it useful to characterize tribal ethnic groups as backward and unchanging. Early cultural anthropologists were torn between their education in the field of physical anthropology and their recognition that traits which suggested permanence were in fact newly created. Intrinsic differences, defined by "race", gave the

colonial powers a moral justification for their rule, preventing conflict between opposing groups and attempting to raise the morality of "primitive" races. Colonialism created a context in which perceived racial differences became institutionalized within political structures.

> It is interesting to speculate whether... with British control gone and its immediate memory forgotten, the speakers of some at least of the many vernaculars of the Indian Empires would not in due time develop a nationalism of their own in relation to their neighbours, especially if they were faced by attempts to impose a single vernacular as the official language or by decisions of a central government which seemed to impose unfair local disadvantages in the economic sphere. (R.I.I.A. 1939: 146)

Thus the colonial powers regarded themselves as adjudicators between intrinsically opposed groups which, given the "correct" guidance, might eventually develop into nationhood. Early anthropological writings supported this assumption. That early anthropologists were generally in service to colonial governments was no doubt an important factor and Curzon for one felt that anthropologists were an intrinsic part of the colonial system, indeed, part of the "furniture of the imperial mind" (Hewitt 1997: xvi).

The relationship between anthropologists and the colonial powers is disputed. Van den Berghe argues that through treating Africa as a "vast ethnographic garden of Eden" (quoted in Brown 1973: 174) and an implicit commitment to maintain the status quo, anthropologists legitimized colonial rule. However, a revisionist argument has been made arguing that anthropologists links with both capitalism and colonialism have been over-

emphasized, at least in the twentieth century. Brown (1973) argues that an examination of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute, at which most of the Manchester School writers began their careers, suggests that it developed into a surprisingly independent centre of learning, despite being financed by the colonial government and copper companies (see also Burton 1992).

Primordialist, racial explanations have little salience with regard to the Assamese case since the very heterogeneity of the region means that the inhabitants of Assam are all, to a greater or lesser extent, migrants at some point in the past. The indigenous Assamese, in as much as they exist, are, by definition, a mixture of many older groups. As will be demonstrated throughout the thesis, notions of being Assamese have been constructed in response to particular events and cannot be claimed to represent primordial sentiments. It was similar observations that changed the perspective of anthropologists throughout the twentieth century.

The "Manchester school" of anthropologists initially assumed that ethnic ties would decrease as modernity intensified. Wilson (1941-1942), for example, examined the effect that urbanization, in the form of a move to mining barracks, was having on the villagers it was affecting. He argued that a process of detribalization was taking place. This approach gave theoretical justification to later modernization theorists. Furthermore, the acceptance that identities can change began the process away from ideas of primordialism.

Conversely, the later Manchester School writers witnessed the persistence of tribal loyalties. Mitchell

(1956) examined the Kalela dance; a "cultural marker" unnecessary in ethnically homogenous villages. In a mixed urban setting, again mining barracks, it became more important to make one's group membership clear. Thus rather than detribalization, Mitchell argued that modernization was encouraging a process of retribalization. The main achievement of the Manchester School was that it started the trend to break away from the grand narrative based on modernization, implying that tribal ties would be replaced by allegiance to the nation-state and instead moved towards a system of personal experience through field work (Khokeid 1992). This major anthropological development enabled a broader contextual perspective to be taken in relation to ethnicity.

The "Chicago School" of American anthropologists focused on the issue of acculturation into the society of the United States in the 1920's and 1930's. The questions raised by Robert Park and his associates related to the issue of how different ethnic groups remained distinctive over time. Park argued that an individual could attain many goals through his or her ethnic ties but to advance through the system as a whole required "an adoption of the white-English speaking majority's values and ways of life" (Eriksen 1993: 19).

Park's general conclusion, that identities were fluid, provided a further move away from primordialism, in regarding attachments as dynamic. However, in his analysis Park assumed that, although it may well take a few generations, individuals would eventually become loyal to the nationalism of the state, that is, towards

the U.S.A.. Thus, the developmental bias still existed, with the culture of the U.S.A. being perceived as more advanced than that from where immigrants came, primarily since civic allegiance was assumed to be "higher" than blood relationships. Older cultures were expected to merge into newer, "modern" cultures defined by territory and citizenship. Although Park's summary could certainly be used to explain the continuation of ethnic attachments, this was by no means the expected outcome;

> the ease and rapidity with which aliens, under existing conditions in the United States, have been able to assimilate themselves to the customs and manners of American life have enabled this country to swallow and digest every sort of normal human difference, except the purely external ones, like the colour of the skin. (Park 1950: 206)

As with investigations of tribal identities, later anthropological works attempted to explain ethnic longevity and the apparent failure of acculturation. In 1938, Hansen wrote that it is an "almost universal phenomenon that what the son wishes to forget the grandson wishes to remember" (Quoted in Petersen 1979: 4). Hansen argued that when immigrants moved to the United States, the first generation still spoke their mother tongue and kept their native customs. The second generation attempted to become American, dropping old customs, speaking English and so forth (Hansen 1940: 93). The third generation, however, feel lost, having no deep roots in the United States, and this reawakens an interest in the traditions of their grandparent's mother country which they may indeed reinvent, based on assumptions of their original traditions. The use of

archaic terms and dialects by immigrant Norwegians exemplifies this (Hansen 1940: 82).

This idea is the precursor of contemporary literature regarding diaspora communities. These groups have often constructed cultural markers based upon, but different from, traditions practised within their "homeland". As with Mitchell's work, emphasis upon cultural difference is only necessary to accentuate division from other communities.

These early works suffer from two major failings. Despite recognising that identities change and are articulated dependent upon the context, developmental assumptions remain; certain identities are perceived to be more evolved than others. This leads to a perception that identities are primordial. That is, that ethnic identities are genealogically determined and represent what individuals intrinsically are.

Thus explanations of ethnic revivalism were less common than expectations of ethnic "acculturation" and this approach was reflected in both Marxist and modernization theories of ethnicity.

In some measure both cause and consequence of anthropological research, both dominant ideological discourses, Marxism and liberalism, assumed that ethnic attachments would fade over time. Marxist theories assumed that since nationalist, and thus ethnic, sentiments were types of false consciousness, both would wither as "true" class consciousness increased. The Communist Manifesto argues that;

> The working men have no country. We cannot take from them what they have not got. Since the proletariat must first of all acquire political supremacy, must

> rise to be the leading class of the nation, must constitute itself the nation, it is, so far, itself national, though not in the bourgeois sense of the word. (Marx and Engels 1888: 20)

Lenin developed this further, distinguishing between a short-term need for nationalist movements as an anti-imperial measure, and longer-term internationalism;

> If a Social-Democrat belonging to a great, oppressing, annexing nation, while advocating the amalgamation of nations in general, were to forget even for one moment that "his" Nicholas II, "his" Wilhelm, George, Poincare, etc., also stand for amalgamation with small nations (by means of annexations)... such a Social-Democrat would be a ridiculous doctrinaire in theory and an abettor of imperialism in practice... On the other hand, a Social-Democrat belonging to a small nation must... fight against small-nation narrow-mindedness, insularity and aloofness, he must fight for the recognition of the whole and the general, for the subordination of the interests of the particular to the interests of the general. (Quoted in Stalin 1945: 66-67)

National affiliations were represented as meaningless to Marxists, since the state represents bourgeois interests, and an individual's "true" identity is class-based.

> ...those who are critical of existing inequalities and who operate within the Marxian tradition tend to write off what people perceive as their relationship to each other - when not conceived in class terms - as of secondary importance to their "real" class relationships. (McAll 1990: 7)

The nationalist movements of 1848, which particularly influenced Marx, were seen as part of a move towards a different stage of society; the move from multi-national empires to bourgeois liberal nation-states.

This approach has affected Marxist interpretations of ethnic identities. As Eriksen reports, during the 1970's;

> numerous well-researched studies were published on classic "plural societies"... Many of these studies seemed to show unequivocally that ethnic conflict and ethnic identity were surface phenomena which were ultimately determined by domestic class relations or by international imperialism, Few would argue in the same manner twenty years later. (Eriksen 1993: 161)

Ethnic feelings, along with national feelings at the "wrong" stage of history, were seen to mask an individual's real attachments. For example, a member of the English working-class;

> feels himself a member of the ruling nation and so turns himself into a tool of the aristocrats and capitalists of his country against Ireland, thus strengthening their domination over himself... The Irishman pays him back with interest... He sees in the English worker at once the accomplice and the stupid tool of English domination in Ireland. (McAll 1990: 73)

Cultural factors are thus seen as part of a "superstructure", attempting to subvert an individual's true attachment to a material reality determined by class affiliation and relationship to the means of production. Gramsci explains these notions of false consciousness through his critique of Italian nationalism but, as Ranajit Guha argues;

> Unfortunately, Gramsci too occasionally falls into the false objectivism of believing that such a consciousness is mere imagination, failing to note, against the grain of his own thought, that such imaginings - encrusted, crystallized, entertained for a long enough time - would produce the "objectively" or naturally existing consciousness. (R. Guha 1992: 9)

Thus although Marxists were too dismissive of ethnic attachments and self-perception of identity, their approach enabled the deconstruction of identity creation to occur. Investigations of the role played by elites helped continue the trend traced above through which identities are recognized as malleable. However, those Marxists who have attempted to correct the failing have generally been unsuccessful due to the incompatibility of the two notions of identity.

Liberal modernization theorists similarly assumed ethnic affiliations to be a part of an individual's traditional pre-industrial allegiances. In the free market there would be no place for these sentiments. Free movement of labour, improved communications, trades unions and so forth, resulting from the centrality of the market, would all serve to break down old ties.[5] The earlier anthropological research provided a major theoretical basis for these assumptions, which were developed by sociologists, political scientists and development economists in their specific contexts.

For example, Hechter and Levi argued that as migration occurred, the geographical concentration of any one ethnic group would be reduced and a more generic social order brought into being (Hechter and Levi 1979:

---

[5] Many proponents of the "globalization" thesis (for example, Hannerz 1993) return to the assumptions of modernization theorists, suggesting that economically successful individuals will be able to ply their trades world-wide and thus their attachment to an individual nation will decline, being replaced perhaps by loyalty to companies. However, it is recognized that those individuals left out of this process may well react by emphasising localized ethnic attachments.

266). From increased social interaction the social structure of the centre would diffuse into the periphery.

Birch similarly argued that ethnic ties, residual loyalties from an earlier, pre-modern era, would be displaced by economic rationality as an individual's prime motivational force (Birch 1978: 325).

In practice, neither liberal nor Marxist viewpoint has been proved correct. As states have "modernized", increased mobility and socio-economic change has often increased, rather than decreased, the articulation of ethnic identities and the resulting ethnic tensions.

There is an obvious discrepancy in both traditional Marxist and modernization theories over the relationship between ethnic and national feelings. Marxists have simply seen ethnicity as a localized version of nationalism, both being types of false consciousness. Modernization theorists argued that although nationalism was an integral part of the world order, ethnicity was simply a bastardized and inferior localized version of this. Thus, it was assumed simultaneously that a nation somehow represented the natural order to which individuals can and should be loyal, whilst ethnic movements, which justify themselves using cultural markers in the same manner as nations, were seen as backward. To some extent this can be explained by the nature of international relations and the resulting dominance given to state-level politics, the intellectual hegemony of Marxist and liberal dogmas, as well as the method by which anthropological research implied links between non-nationalist identities and backwardness.

These assumptions had the effect of removing ethnicity from mainstream academic enquiry. It was not until the 1960's when it became clear that acculturation within individual nation-states was not occurring that the problems of ethnicity were examined from a number of perspectives. Even then, Connor noted that in a sample of ten classic works on integration theory; "none of the ten dedicates a section, chapter, or major subheading to the matter of ethnic diversity" (Connor 1972: 319).

Crawford Young agreed, writing that;

> of the first wave of classic nationalism monographs, only the Coleman study on Nigeria (1958) directly addressed, in extenso, the ethnic issue. (Crawford Young 1986: 441)

The failure of many post-colonial states to remove tribal divisions, coupled with the perpetuation, or apparent re-awakening, of ethnic conflict in the "developed" world, led to increasing investigation and explanation of ethnicity. The post-colonial states were less prone to accept anthropological surveys of "native" subjects, in part due to the perceived close links between colonial rule and anthropological investigation. This led to more sociological studies, sociologists asking similar questions to anthropologists but with regard to more "advanced" societies.

For example, Rogowski and Wasserspring attempted to explain ethnic resurgence through reference to ascriptive criteria, arguing that ethnic ties are reinforced at the expense of, perhaps, class, occupational or political allegiances;

> Increased rates of social interaction do not increase the "cognitive problem" uniformly; rather they crowd out ascriptive criteria with high costs

> of information... There remain criteria with quite low costs of information... And interaction would have to become very hectic indeed to prevent actors noticing readily (and hence perhaps acting upon) criteria of this kind. (Rogowski and Wasserspring 1971: 9-10)

Another explanation for ethnic conflict is put forward by Horowitz. Ethnic divisions can exist in two fundamental forms; ranked and unranked. In ranked systems ethnicity coincides with social structure, giving the impression of obvious inequity. A patron-client relationship exists with the dominant ethnic group providing security, and receiving from the sub-ordinate group services, loyalty and so on (Horowitz 1985: 26). Horowitz uses this framework to explain the existence of obvious inequities in many African societies.

Horowitz further suggests that, as modernization occurs, it becomes profitable for the dominant group to switch production towards more profitable goods, such as cash-crops, to the extent of failing to provide the requisite level of protection for the subordinate group. When this occurs, the latter have nothing to gain by accepting the protection of the dominant group (Horowitz 1971: 236).

Unranked systems are therefore more likely to survive dislocations since, within each group, there are opportunities for individuals to move upwards. According to Horowitz, when conflict does occur in unranked societies, it is more likely to take the form of a separatist revolt attempting to return to some homogenous past rather than a social revolution (Horowitz 1971: 235).

The "ethnic competition" model (Banton 1983) however, suggests the opposite outcome. In unranked systems, individuals compete for the benefits of modernization. However, as these benefits are relatively scarce, ethnic groups become more salient as organizations through which benefits can be channelled (Nielsen 1985: 142).

Hechter's "internal colonialism" model concerned;

> the persistence of separate ethnic identity in the Celtic regions of the British Isles, Wales, Scotland and Ireland during a century of rapid social change. (Hechter 1977: 11)

Hechter's work starts from two premises. Firstly, that there is a "cultural division of labour", such that;

> individuals are assigned to specific types of occupations and other social roles on the basis of observable cultural traits and markers. (Hechter 1974: 1154)

If a culturally distinct periphery perceives itself as being exploited by the core, this economic difference can reinforce ethnic ties. Thus the subordinate group undergoes what Nielsen refers to as "reactive ethnicity" (Nielsen 1985: 133).

Secondly, Hechter argues that;

> the spatially uneven wave of modernization over state territory creates relatively advanced and less advanced groups. As a consequence of this initial fortuitous advantage, there is a crystallization of the unequal distribution of resources and power between the two groups. (Hechter 1977: 9)

Although this thesis is concerned with the manner in which the communities were constructed in the first place, the emergence, rather than the persistence, of ethnic identities, the internal colonialism model

provides an important insight into the process by which these existing ties can be reinforced.

Yet, as with so many of these models, the initial construction of ethnicity is accepted, along with the fact that ethnic groups are ranked or unranked, which is itself a social and cultural construct liable to change, like the ethnic identity itself.

Brass applies the internal colonialism model to South Asia and, agreeing with Hechter, argues that since the benefits of development are unequally distributed between ethnic groups, economic scarcity will reinforce cultural identities around differing signifiers;

> Every nationalist movement has justified its demands in terms of existing or anticipated oppression and in terms of perceived inequalities between itself and another group. However, the mere existence of inequality is not sufficient... What is required is unevenness in the distribution of ethnic groups in the division of labour in a society. (Brass 1976: 233)

Brass also highlights strategic issues; political organization, government response and the political environment, as affecting ethnic salience, particularly in terms of votes within the democratic framework.

If it is accepted that traditions are constructed, based upon perceptions of older cultural markers, then Hechter's assumption of ancient ethnic sentiments persisting despite English imperialism, surely misses the point that Celtic ethnicity has increased *due* to a perception of internal colonialism! Indeed the internal colonialism argument is often used to explain why a sub-ordinate group rediscovers its ethnic roots, yet there is a strong argument that this is an entirely created ethnicity. Lakshmanan, for example, argues that Tamil

ethnicity stemmed not from any internal colonialism, but instead as a response to political mobilization by the majority Sinhalese community (Lakshmanan 1986: 9-20).

The fundamental problem with most of these analyses is that although they may acknowledge that ethnicity is socially constructed, the explanations for its salience treat it as if it were a fixed attachment. Certain factors are seen to affect the utility of articulating an ethnic identity within the political structure but ethnicity is still seen as a residual loyalty which can be awakened if certain economic, political or social conditions prevail. An implicit assumption is that ethnicity is something which can be regulated, controlled and sanctioned within the present nation-state system, suggesting that it must be a permanent feature within an individual's make-up.

A further intellectual development has been enabled by Marxist analysis, arguing that national identities are themselves constructed and are in no way real, allowing for the investigation of the relationship between these two "imagined" communities.

The modernist approach argues that ethnic nationalism is both a necessary and unavoidable construction of modernity, born out of particular political and economic circumstances in Europe and utilized as a means of resistance to colonial rule in the developing world. As Gellner puts it;

> A man must have a nationality as he must have a nose and two ears; a deficiency in any of these particulars is not inconceivable and does from time to time occur, but only as a result of some disaster... All this seems obvious, though, alas it is not true. But that it should have come to seem so

> true is indeed an aspect, or perhaps the very core of the problem of nationalism. Having a nation is not an inherent attribute of humanity, but it has come to appear as such. (Gellner 1983: 6)

What is the specific relationship between nationalism and ethnicity? Crawford Young sums up the general position arguing that, although both justify themselves using signs and symbols, there is a theoretical difference;

> Both are... "imagined communities"; they are socially constructed ideas of common identity. The critical difference lies in sovereignty, or the claim to it; nations are, in the contemporary world, indissolubly associated with states - or assertion, through the doctrine of self-determination, to the right to sovereign statehood. (Crawford Young 1986: 440)

Giddens takes this point even further;

> A "nation", as I use the term here, only exists when a state has a unified administrative reach over the territory over which its sovereignty is claimed. (Giddens 1984: 116)

Hence the terms nation and state can be used interchangeably, with little thought, but an ethnic group can only be called nationalist if it makes a claim for statehood.

There are complex dynamics in the relationship between the two "imagined communities" but the obvious links are now being recognized. Hobsbawm, for example, argues that; "the basic characteristic of the modern nation and everything connected with it is its modernity" (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1990: 14).

Nationalism is merely a form of state organization, developed in western Europe over the last two centuries, in which an individual's primary loyalty should be towards that state of which they are citizens, as opposed

to pre-modern norms in which an individual's allegiance is to some form of localism. Eriksen argued that a nation merely represents an ethnic group which has achieved statehood;

> Weak nations, as in Africa, fail to convince their members of their common destiny (very often such nations cannot be based on existing ethnicities but seek to invent it); strong nations, conversely, have succeeded in convincing their members that they are indeed "the same kind of people" - they identify with the nation-state. (Eriksen 1992: 220)

Given that ethnicity is a social construct, nationalism is either a reflexive form of ethnicity, or the outcome of a previous ethnic movement. In post-colonial states, for example, nationalism is expressed both through de jure statehood and an attempted amalgamation of previous ethnic ties into a new identity. That ethnic groups which have, or aspire to have, statehood are regarded as in some way modern, whilst other ethnic attachments are regarded as traditional allegiances which will dissolve as modernization advances, is a theoretical anomaly.

The construction of nationalism is such that it implies an overlapping of state boundaries and an individual's primary identity. Yet if a sub-nationalist ethnic group remained and achieved its own state, minority problems would not be solved. Unless all potential stigmatizing features are shared (language, race, religion and so forth) the potential for a cultural claim of separateness is always available. The potential Tamil state of northern and eastern Sri Lanka, constructed in opposition to the Sinhalese, for instance,

could face further religious ethnic conflict between Muslims and Buddhists.

In distinguishing between the "origin myths" of France and Germany, Calhoun inadvertently highlights the terminological problem with ethnicity. He argues that the former emphasizes the role of the citizen in founding the French nation, whilst "Germanness" is seen as much more of a blood relationship. German nationalists; "have emphasised ethnic rather than "political" or "civic" criteria for inclusion in the nation" (Calhoun 1993: 221).

Yet ethnicity, as with nationalism, requires acceptance by others of an individual's group membership. Although an imagined blood relationship may well be part of this, it is in no way necessary for ethnic acceptance. For example, tribal groups change their membership and it takes time for newcomers to gain acceptance into any ethnic category. There is nothing more ethnic about an imagined blood relationship than there is about sharing similar civic beliefs as long as both lead to acceptance by other members of the group and a perception from outsiders that the individual is indeed a member of that group.

This perhaps shows the major problem associated with ethnicity since it has developed into a concept that is more "real" than nationalism, in that it is seen to be a clannish, blood relationship. Yet ethnicity, like nationalism, requires the articulation and manipulation of cultural signs and symbols.

Anthony Smith attempts to overcome this semantic problem through the use of the term *ethnie* (Smith 1991) but this approach has been criticized since;

> The connotations of ethnie ("ethnic group") in French are sometimes uncomfortably close to obsolete notions of race or reifying notions of "cultures". (Eriksen 1993: 161)

This trend away from primordial notions developed further through the post-modern critique of western thought. This has, in general terms, involved a revision of accepted interpretations through fragmentary perspectives. As Partha Chatterjee argues;

> By now knowledgeable people all over the world have become familiar with the charges levelled against the subject centred rationality characteristic of post-Enlightenment modernity. The subject-centred reason, we have now been told, claims for itself a singular universality by asserting its epistemic privilege over all local, plural and often incommensurable knowledges. (Chatterjee 1993: xi)

The general theme of the Frankfurt school focuses upon the prevalence of western universalist biases and assumes that the original ideals of the enlightenment have been undermined by "technical progress".

Post-orientalist viewpoints contend that ethnic identities were by no means unavoidable, instead arguing that colonialism; "first created and then imposed ethnic and cultural identities on those under its rule" (Buck 1994: 4).

Nationalism is thereby attacked as an intrinsically western development that the colonized elites had to utilize as a strategy to gain independence. The entire artificiality of any nationalist notions in the colonized world, coupled with the imperial powers' ability to divide and rule, explains much of the ethnic "revivalism"

of the past thirty years. The ability of "sub-nationalist" ethnic elites to use cultural markers against existing national authority is seen as a demonstration of the inability of nationalism, as an ethos, to be externally imposed.

To this end, these viewpoints have encouraged subaltern studies, examining smaller, more fragmented movements, rather than accepting the broad "meta-narrative" of nationalism. Identities, as Lakshmanan argued, are seen to be constructed in opposition to other identities. Examinations of the role of the elite, developed from the writings of Gramsci and expanded by Raymond Williams, in particular, in affecting consciousness, have been particularly influential.

Gramsci argued that civil society was itself contested, and was the outcome of the dominance of certain groups. Ensuring order required the hegemony of certain ideas;

> consciously and programmatically (as in the early stages of such a process of hegemonic construction) or increasingly as the "natural" and unreflected administration or reproduction of a given way of doing things. (Eley 1994: 324)

Williams describes this hegemony as;

> not only the conscious system of ideas and beliefs but the whole lived social process as practically organized by specific dominant meanings and values. (Quoted in Eley 1994: 321)

This focus on hegemony has been reflected in studies of identity. For example, Abner Cohen, arguing that ethnic claims are solely made for political purposes, argues that culture is in itself irrelevant to ethnicity. It is the articulation of cultural differences, which is constructed, that is important in terms of social

relationships. It is for political, rather than cultural purposes that cultural differences are articulated.

This position enables him to claim that City of London elites may be said to be ethnic, being endogamous and having a shared identity (Cohen 1974b: 101). Cohen further claims that;

> There is ethnicity and ethnicity... I think that it is common sense that the collectivity that manifests itself in the form of an annual gathering of a few of its numbers to perform a dance or a ceremonial is different from the ethnicity manifested by, say, the Catholics in Northern Ireland. (Cohen 1974a: xiv)

This is the inevitable outcome of situationalist arguments. Is there any purpose in using the same analytical term to refer to completely different political situations? If the difference between nationalism and ethnicity is the claim of the former to statehood, then what, if anything, is the meaning of sub-nationalism?

There is a concern that assumptions of voluntarism, the ability to pick and choose communal allegiances, have gone too far. Ajit Danda argues that;

> ethnicity as a concept, without the prejudice ordinarily assigned to it, should not be anything much different from what is understood by political mobility. (Danda 1989: 218)

If there is nothing inherent about ethnic identities, what does this mean about its use as an analytical category? If we are to accept any community which shares certain cultural values is an ethnic group, any descriptive use is lost. Communities may more accurately be described as cultural groups, a term which allows more easily for blurring at the boundaries of a community and for the integration of new members,

recognizing that cultural traits can be adopted to gain group acceptance.

Without clarification, debates on ethnicity will involve different writers describing completely different notions. If we are to agree with Hettne, that "ethnicity is necessarily an elusive concept" (Hettne 1993: 125), then it should at least be clear under what ground-rules it operates. The shift of emphasis from structure to agency reflects the dynamic nature of identity more accurately, but implies that a term which derives from structural thinking is now obsolete.

It is for these reasons that throughout this thesis the Assam Movement will be referred to as a cultural, rather than an ethnic movement. The Assam Movement is ethnic, and "Assamese" is an ethnic category, using broad tautological definitions of ethnicity, but it is primarily political. As Cohen argues, the political claims come first but they are articulated through cultural (ethnic) allegiances. That is, the cultural similarities which are articulated are only utilized for a political purpose and not for their own sake.

This point is accepted in much of the recent literature regarding ethnicity but the intellectual tradition, or baggage perhaps, implies that ethnicity does require an (imagined) blood relationship, and the popular usage of the term reflects this.

The major question for social theorists is *how*, *why* and *with what effect* cultural groups have been created as channels of political or economic patronage. Ethno-genesis cannot occur without some notion of what distinguishes an X from a Y. To this end there has to

have been some distinctive cultural signs and symbols and some Other in opposition to which allegiances have been necessary. Over time, the internal and external depiction of a group reproduces itself, long after the original justification for this type of behaviour has passed.

Cultural identities are available to all individuals. Tribes, languages, religious practices, territories and nations can all provide the basis for a claim. These identities are not primordial, nor are they ancient, as Smith claims, although ancient events, Calhoun's "origin myths" (Calhoun 1993: 221), may well be used to justify the existence of a particular group. If there is no notion of what being Assamese is, then one cannot belong to the Assamese group.

Conversely, if there are no benefits, whether economic, social or political, to an individual by being Assamese, and acting in ways that validate their Assameseness,[6] then the group will lose its political salience. This is neither a short-term voluntarism nor a long-term primordialism, but an ever-present political process. The necessary element of negotiation within the process demonstrates the utility of the post-modern approach; unlike nationalism, ethnicity is not a feature of modernity, since the desire to live in a community has ever been a source of strength and, by definition, division, for individuals. As Worsley argues;

---

[6] Moerman, examining the Lue, was unable to find any cultural distinctions between the Lue and their neighbours. He concluded that "someone is a Lue by virtue of believing and calling himself Lue and of acting in ways that validate his Lueness" (Moerman 1965: 1222).

> Cultural traits are not absolutes or simply intellectual categories, but are invoked to provide identities which legitimize claims to rights. They are strategies or weapons in competitions over scarce social goods. What is mistakenly often seen as tradition - attachment to the past as a value in itself - is better viewed as a way of maintaining title to power, wealth and status in the present. (Worsley 1984: 249)

This is neither Hansen's quest for nostalgia, nor Hechter's internal colonialism, but a more generic self-evident truth; that individuals will utilize whichever identity they are able to, and in which they are accepted, to protect themselves from unwanted and perceived harmful change. If elites are able to persuade individuals that through articulating an Assamese identity they will benefit in some way, the likelihood of individuals articulating this identity will increase. As will be demonstrated throughout this thesis, specific conceptions of being Assamese have only led to political power if enough marginal members have joined this community.

1.2 The Other

The most important development in theories regarding identity is the shift in belief from thinking that identities are inherent, and as such can be reduced to some essence, to the idea that they are contextual and thereby constructed in opposition to other groups. This idea, articulated by Mitchell in 1956, is now accepted, whether or not one believes that identities are primordial or constructed. Even if identities are thought to be inherent, their articulation arises due to a relationship with a different group.

Although the focus of much of the work on ethnicity has suggested that it is the salience of an existing ethnic identity which increases due to an iniquitous relationship with another group, more theorists, such as Lakshmanan, now argue that it is a newly constructed identity constructed around cultural markers in response to a stigmatized and classifiable Other. As Kaviraj argues;

> Any conception of community is based on an idea of identity, which is predicated in turn on some conception of difference. (Kaviraj 1992: 20)

Throughout this thesis concepts of Assamese identity will be examined with reference to the dominant Other against which it has been constructed. This Other has varied between the British, Bengalis in general, Bengali Hindus, Bengali Muslims, Muslims in general and indigenous tribals. The construction of an Assamese identity in opposition to different groups can be attributed to the articulation of different myths, a changing external environment and internal aims.

This section will briefly trace the origins of this school of thought, before turning to the more direct implications in the study of South Asia. The application of notions of the Other developed through Edward Said's work when examining the discourse of colonial powers. Many scholars have particularly applied this in a South Asian context, analyzing the British construction of communities. This implies that constructed groups can themselves construct interpretations of each other, in part based on British conceptions and reinforced through subsequent British policies.

It is often implicitly assumed that through the portrayal of a group as possessing certain inherent traits these will become self-perpetuating. Waldron (1990) uses the example of the Great Wall of China to demonstrate the manner in which a feature originally regarded only by western observers as a defining characteristic of China, eventually became recognized as such by the Chinese themselves. Theoretically, the ascription of cultural values in the same manner as physical artifacts would seem a compatible extension of Waldron's original argument.

The effects of being classified by an Other are dependent upon the power relationship with the different group. As Waldron suggests, it can lead to an adoption of the trait by the group to define themselves. For example, the notion of the Gurkhas as a martial race, discussed below, may or may not have been internalized by the Gurkhas but through the institutionalization of army recruitment the idea became, in this case, willingly accepted. The same argument could be made regarding the over-representation of upper-caste Bengalis in the Indian Civil Service.

Alternatively, many of the British assumptions about groups were highly derogatory;

> Gujars, for instance, were described as "given to indiscriminate plunder in times of disturbance", while Banjaras had "a reputation for perfect honesty". (Consistency, however, was always elusive. for the Banjaras were later classified as a "criminal" tribe.) (Metcalf 1997: 119)

The denial of these claims, by the groups themselves, may lead to the construction of alternative myths, and Chapter Four demonstrates the different

approaches taken by the present-day Assamese in response to claims made by the British. The problem with this approach, particularly under colonial rule, was that governance and administration were organized around the "fact" that the group possessed whichever trait. Thus, for example, the Bengalis were privileged with regard to positions in the Indian Civil Service, Sikhs and Gurkhas with regard to opportunities in the Indian Army, and Marwaris as traders.

These first two scenarios both assume that the group classifying is in a position of power with regards to the group being classified. Thus British claims regarding the cultural attributes of groups could be accepted or denied but the ability of, for example, the Assamese, to deny the right of the British to classify them was negligible. Indeed, the fact that the Assamese were classified at all, however disdainfully, gave certain rights to the elite of that group, given the British attempt to deal with the leaders of each community.[7]

Foucault argued that the ability to classify is in itself a manifestation of power;

> There is no power relation without a correlative body of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations. (Foucault 1977: 27)

Once this initial classification has taken place, these traits become internalized, whether accepted or rejected. However, this affects the perception of the

---

[7] Although, as Bayly has argued, British policies did much to alter, or at least speed up, changes which were already occurring amongst the elite (Bayly 1990: 150-155).

groups by other, politically more equal, groups. Thus Bengalis, for example, began to perceive Assam as a land of opportunity in part because the Assamese were thought to be indolent. In turn the Assamese and Bengalis constructed more virulent stereotypes of each other based on the earlier British constructs and assumptions. In this third situation then, the power relationship between groups to make claims is less clear-cut and the expectation is that each will attempt to gain the necessary political power to validate their claims.

Said's investigation of *Orientalism* provided a major development in the studies of non-western communities. Said argues that Orientalism "suggests both an enduring Oriental reality and an opposing but no less enduring Western essence" (Said 1995: 333). Said argues that the construction of the "Orient" and the West in opposition, with pre-eminence given to the western construction of the "Orient", created false dichotomies and masked localized differences.

Said's work raises a fundamental issue regarding how, if at all, one can "know" the Other. Said opposes the idea that only self-representation is possible although he accepts that the emphasis on the local and fragmentary are in danger of;

> slipping into a kind of "possessive exclusivism" which holds that the only valid kind of representation is the self-representation of insiders. (O'Hanlon and Washbrook 1992: 157)

As Turner argues, "deconstruction as a technique merely identified the problems of representation without offering many solutions" (Turner 1994: 6).

One of the first applications of this type of analysis in the South Asian context is Inden's *Imagining India*, derived in part from *Orientalism*, which argues that the study of India has attempted to emphasize essential notions, in particular caste, at the expense of human agency. Furthermore;

> [The Indological text] functions to depict the thoughts and institutions of Indians as distortions of normal and natural (that is, Western) thoughts and institutions. It represents them as manifestations of an alien mentality. (Inden 1986: 411)

The deconstruction of these essences demonstrates that the effect of human agency is as important in India as in the West, but that assumptions and stereotypes distort, rather than enlighten, academic discussion. The problem with this deconstructive approach is how to replace the gaps created, and Inden's "reconstructions", in part based upon the reports of Arab travellers (Inden 1992: 213-217), lays open to the same charge as that made against Said and the *Subaltern Studies* school (see section 2.2);

> One is tempted to ask whether his own imagination is any less suspect than those he castigates, or indeed whether he is not indulging in a kind of inverted intellectualism by privileging medieval travelogues over the voluminous administrator scholarship of the British and... later generations. (Quigley 1991: 405)

Other research has examined more specific case-studies. Caplan argues that the stress on difference, that is usual in orientalist discourse, is lacking in

descriptions of the Gurkhas. Characterisations of their bravery and loyalty were justified through their possession of British traits; honesty, doggedness, a good sense of humour and independence, for example (Caplan 1991: 591). In this instance, representations of the Other are actually more concerned with representations of the self, or alternatively, of justifying, and thereby constructing, differences between Gurkhas and other Indians.

Peers' investigation of the notion of martial races explains why the British perceived of the Bengalis as being a non-martial race. This idea was used to explain the decline of the Army of the Bengal Presidency from being one of the linchpins of British control. Peer's argues that the categorisation derived from strategic factors, particularly the poor performances in the Burmese Wars which were actually due to poor (British) leadership. However the notion that the Bengalis were not a martial race survived substantially intact until the 1971 Bangladesh War. Again, it seems clear that these representations of the Other owe more to notions and conceptions of self, rather than any comprehension of the Other, yet through their imposition they become accepted as truth.

The control the British held over communities in India enabled them to represent themselves as the epitome of a successful people and this became justified through reference both to the Roman Empire, of which the British thought themselves the true descendants (Metcalf 1997: 2-3) and through growing reference to racial superiority (Metcalf 1997: 55). This engrained Darwinian notion

allowed groups to be described only through British characteristics; when a people possessed "good" characteristics it was due to their sharing certain British traits, when these were absent, in, for example, the "criminal castes", this was due to their lack of British virtues. As Inden argues (Inden 1992: 23) this feature of colonial rule removed the ability for agency from the actions of Indian subjects.

For example, the Gurkhas may have been similar to the British but there is no way in which they were, or could ever be, British. The portrayal of Assam reflects this paradox. The Assamese laziness is seen more as schoolboy waywardness, due to their adoption of Brahminism and other corrupting influences, than anything inherent, although the damage done by this was too much for the British to be expected to remedy.

The ambiguities of anthropological practice and the use of these constructs by the colonial power, resulted in some traits becoming accepted in popular perception. The colonial powers were able to enforce their perceptions through the creation of structures suited to the groups, as they were perceived. In the Assamese case, this led to the encouragement of migration from Bengal, thereby reinforcing the original claims. Through these perceptions, which perhaps demonstrate more about the British colonial officers than the indigenous groups, forms of governance, economic rights and political power were allocated, and strictures put in place which have remained, perpetuating the earlier myths.

Through the genealogy presented in this thesis, the role of differing Others will be examined, with an

implicit assumption that much of what is said by members of the Assamese community regarding Bengalis, reflects as much on the speakers' view of the Assamese community as the Bengali.

1.3 Myths and Memories

The belief that a shared history is necessary, if insufficient, for the consolidation of an ethnic identity is well-established (for example, Smith 1991: 21, Calhoun 1993: 221). Furthermore, the work of Hobsbawm and Ranger (1996) has led to a conventional acceptance that these traditions are constructed.

However, despite countless examples in practice, there are few theoretical explanations of the interpretation of history as a tool, rather than as a mirror reflecting reality. Foucault explains the creation of myths by arguing that control of a discourse empowers elites;

> The exercise of power in society thus presupposes new forms of scientific discourse through which deviant and marginal groups are defined and controlled. (Turner 1994: 20-21)

Foucault's critique of scientific knowledge implies that non-scientific myth similarly represents a power-relationship. However, the best account of the acceptance of these myths is still provided by Ernst Cassirer (1946).

Cassirer argues that simple "primeval stupidity" (Cassirer 1946: 4) is an unsatisfactory explanation of the prevalence of myths which apparently oppose Western scientific logic. Instead, he argues that the desire of peoples to classify their surroundings;

> express the same desire of human nature to come to terms with reality, to live in an ordered universe,

> and to overcome the chaotic state in which things and thoughts have not yet assumed a definite shape and structure. (Cassirer 1946: 15)

Cassirer argues that this use of myth achieved its highest pinnacle under the Nazi Party in Germany. The use of language "to produce certain effects and stir up certain emotions" (Cassirer 1946: 283) and the articulation of the future as scientifically ordained (Cassirer 1946: 283), enabled the use of "primitive" myths to be believed in a "civilized" society. The actual myths used were well established; "Carlyle's theory of hero worship and Gobineau's thesis of the fundamental moral and intellectual diversity of races" (Cassirer 1946: 277). Equally important was the internal political environment in Germany after World War One which was fundamentally different to that which had preceded.

> The international, the social, and the human conflicts became more and more intense. They were felt everywhere. But in England, France and North America there remained some prospect of solving these conflicts by ordinary and normal means. In Germany however the case was different... The leaders of the Weimar Republic had done their best to cope with these problems by diplomatic transactions or legislative measures. But all their efforts seemed to have been in vain. In the times of inflation and unemployment Germany's whole social and economic system was threatened with a complete collapse. The normal resources seemed to have been exhausted. This was the natural soil upon which the political myths could grow up and in which they found ample nourishment. (Cassirer 1946: 277-278)

The use of myth by the Assam Movement, although not suggesting scientific inevitability, has similarly relied on the use of well-established myths and has flourished in a not dissimilar environment to that of inter-war Germany. For example, the articulation of the role of

Lachit Barphukan at the Battle of Saraighat (see section 3.2) bears resemblance with the Nazi Teutonic knights, both in revisiting past grandeur, and in suggesting what can be achieved if the "nation" acts together with a singular purpose. The belief that economic stagnation is due to some economically powerful outside group exists in both Assam (Bengali Hindus, Marwaris) and existed in inter-war Germany (Jews).

Cassirer's work has provided the basis for further studies of the construction and use of myth, of which *the Invention of Tradition* is perhaps most useful and relevant. Hobsbawm and Ranger's work (1983) provides a deconstruction of certain "ancient" traditions, demonstrating that they are in reality relatively recent inventions. Cohn, in his assessment of British rule in India, argues that both the Imperial Assemblage (durbar) of 1877 and Gandhi's request, during the First Non-Cooperation Movement, for all Indians to return honours granted them by the British, exemplify the importance to the British of legitimizing their rule through reference to ancient power structures and to Gandhi of creating and representing "new codes of conduct based on a radically different theory of authority" (Cohn 1983: 209).

That British interpretations of past governance might be, at best, inaccurate, was irrelevant once, through their political control, they could articulate their own representation of history. Gandhi, conversely, attempted to deny British legitimacy through reinventing indigenous power structures.

This use of myth by British and Indian elites is able to "pervade the whole of man's cultural and social

life" (Cassirer 1946: 298) in part because human nature wishes to explain its environment. Equally importantly, the acceptance of certain myths as explanatory of societies has implications for governance. In Cohn's example, those tangible and intangible parts of culture the British attributed to India, durbars (tangible) and deference (intangible), led to an emphasis on the former to ensure the latter. Even though the original trait may have been misconstrued, through the establishment of certain concrete methods of rule, it will eventually be created.

Although the Assam Movement articulates many ideas which date back hundreds of years, many of these myths have only been used as signifiers for an Assamese group for a much shorter space of time. It is the use of these traditions in a political context which is important in examining the consolidation of a particular Assamese group by the contemporary Assam Movement.

Anthropologists, through tracing folklore and customs, have often highlighted those specific myths important to group identity. But the use and content of these myths itself implies vital information as to the recommended behaviour of the group. For example, Datta has argued that many tribal origin myths in northeast India do not solely relate to one particular tribe but instead explain a relationship with neighbouring tribes and with the plains Assamese (Datta 1994: 27-29). Thus the tribals' environment is implicitly recognized to be part of a relationship with other groups.

The importance of myth in a south Asian context is particularly reflected in the debate regarding pre-

colonial communal tension. If it existed in a similar form to that which exists contemporarily (Bayly 1985), then any degree of human agency, that human beings "derive their meaning from the political, economic, social and intellectual circumstances in which they are placed" (Pandey 1990: 15) is lost. Thus control of the discourse, even by "impartial" academics, is a vital part of the political process.

The criticisms made by the *Subaltern Studies* school of the dominant nationalist historiography of south Asia (see section 2.2) have led to major reinterpretations of the nationalist movement. However, the post-modern emphasis on representation rather than truth has meant that attempts to prove the construction of myth are much easier that establishing fact. That is, it is much easier to deconstruct than reconstruct. Attempts to reconstruct have led to criticisms that equally invalid new essences are being created (for example, Quigley 1991 criticizes Inden 1990, O'Hanlon 1988 criticizes Subaltern Studies).

Chapter Two

The Institutional Framework of the Indian State

2.0 Introduction

This chapter will argue that the nature of governance in the post-Independence Indian state tends to give prominence to cultural or communal groups at the expense of individuals, as implied by the dominant secular, liberal, Nehruvian discourse. Despite this overtly secular ideology, the Indian state, as it developed since Independence, is also the product of certain "subaltern" discourses. Through providing a number of rights on the basis of community membership, the Indian state encourages this form of political organization, rather than individual notions of citizenship, for subsequent demands.

It will be argued that the response of Assamese elites to economic and political problems was influenced by the prevailing form of governance which was perceived to implicitly encourage the construction of a specific cultural identity. Thus the self-identification of the supporters of the Assam Movement has been constructed retrospectively. That is, certain, generally higher caste, Assamese-speakers developed a specific conception of "their" community through reference to historic events and political developments to enforce a particular hegemony over the conception of being Assamese.

The manner by which this was achieved relates to the general mode of governance within the Indian state. The perception that certain social rights were removed from political control led to the development of an arena of

public space in which new sub-nationalist identities could attract support, given the liberal ideology which tried to recognize division in an attempt to reduce cleavages in the longer-term. As Jalal argues;

> The Janus-faced stance of the Indian political centre - formally secular in orientation while increasingly relying surreptitiously on communal ideologies - in order to claim national legitimacy in the face of narrowing regional bases of support has imparted an important dimension to movements of regional dissidence not only in the Punjab but also in Assam and Kashmir. (Jalal 1995: 228)

It is the argument of this thesis that this "surreptitious" use of communal ideologies occurs not only when support is mobilized within the democratic process but is built into much resource allocation within the Indian state and, particularly, between the centre and the states.

The chapter begins with an assessment of the Indian nationalist movement and the liberal, secular, Indian state, as envisaged by Nehru and as propagated by the 1950 Constitution. The Nehruvian nation-building project attempted to create an inclusive Indian identity in a state in which divisions had been created, consolidated and enforced by the previous method of governance. The nation-building project, as perceived in the post-colonial world, was seen to require, firstly, an *a priori* basis for the state, that is some historical linkages to justify the nation and, secondly, a supposition that the *de jure* existence of an independent state would itself compound these sentiments.

This section will also examine certain features of the 1950 Constitution which apparently appear to dilute the original liberal/secular tenets. In particular, the

expected and actual development of communal personal laws. These contradictions will be assessed in terms of the prevailing ideology, under which it was perceived that removing, for example, social religious practices from "political" discussion would consolidate notions of unity through diversity, upon which Indian statehood was to be based.

The chapter then turns to critiques of the Nehruvian model, both in theory, with regards to notions of secularism, and in practice, suggesting that the implementation of various policies constituted a trend away from, rather than towards, the original ideal.

The theoretical criticisms relate to the suitability of the Nehruvian version of nationalism to the Indian particular. Other forms of nationalist thought existed which implied a departure from the liberal model (for example, Subhas Chandra Bose) or a re-conception of the meaning of secularism within Hindu society (for example, M.S. Golwalkar[1]). The existence of these divisions suggests that although the Nehruvian model triumphed, the nationalist movement was by no means monolithic. Marxists (for example, M.N. Roy[2]), although supporting the secular liberal ideal, believed that religious affiliations prevented its existence in practice. Brass and Washbrook

---

[1] The second leader of the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (National Volunteer Corps) (R.S.S.).

[2] Until he was expelled from the Comintern in 1929, Roy was a prominent Communist leader. "Thereafter Roy launched out on an intellectual quest which ultimately led him to his own synthesis of materialism and liberal humanism" (D.E.Smith 1963: 156).

have been accused of similarly underplaying the effect of human agency (Hardiman 1982) by arguing that the "faction" provides a useful analytical category with which to examine the workings of the Indian state. Others argue that the liberal/authoritarian dichotomy of the Indian state is insufficient and ignores other important actors within the Indian polity, such as the state as a "self determining third actor" (Rudolph and Rudolph 1987: 400), or the entrenchment of certain pre-Independence elites particularly within the civil service and in the large public sector (Frankel 1978).

The argument of the *Subaltern Studies* school, that the dominant retrospective nationalist historiography ignored localized subaltern anti-colonial movements, is of particular relevance to the Assamese case, given the peripheral involvement of Assam with the mainstream nationalist movement. This position recognizes the difficulties of imposing a top-down nation-building project. The accepted notion that nationalism arose from specific spatial and temporal conditions, namely, industrialization and modernity within the West, implies an unsuitability for the nationalist project within the post-colonial world and perhaps the falseness of the Nehruvian ideal.

Kaviraj makes a broader claim regarding state and society in India. Western theories of the state require linkages between "impersonal governance" and society and assume that the state can only exist within a "civil society". However, Kaviraj argues that;

> to analyze the relationship between state and society in India, it could be argued, is impossible

because they do not exist in India. (Kaviraj 1991: 72)

The third section will elaborate on the previous arguments, through an assessment of a sample of policy developments after 1950; personal law and the Shah Bano case, the Fifty-Third Amendment and state reorganization. Over time, communal rights appear to have increased, rather than declined. These policies can be located within the nationalist movement itself and the resulting Congress Party hegemony, empowering elites at the expense of a homogenized citizenry. State reorganization proved to be a vital part of the development of a chauvinistic high-caste Assamese identity in the late 1970's (for specific details see section 5.2). Again, the theoretical premise behind the move was to modernize administration and reduce feelings of difference but the effect proved to be the reverse, strengthening linguistic and geographical identities at the expense of a homogenous Indian identity.

The fourth section presents case studies of the two most important features of this trend, at least in regard to the Assamese case; reservations policy (reserving opportunities for certain specified backward groups) and the Sixth Schedule. Just as state reorganization was expected to reduce linguistic cleavages, so reservations and the Sixth Schedule were expected to reduce caste and tribal divisions, through empowering these groups to raise themselves politically and economically and overcome long-term discrimination. In the short-term however, the effect was to enhance, rather than reduce, these "primordial" differences.

Throughout this thesis it will be argued that the power of the high-caste Assamese, whether in terms of social influence, economic power or political control, has been eroded since the onset of British rule. These two policies directly removed some economic power, through reservations, and political and social influence over the tribal areas under the Sixth Schedule (for further discussion of the tribal relationship with the Assamese, see sections 3.4 and 5.2).

2.1 The Indian National Congress and the Indian Constitution

The development of the Indian polity can be traced through an assessment of the preceding nationalist movement, the leaders of which institutionalized particular western concepts of secularism and liberalism as the hegemonic discourse upon which nationalism was to be based. The adoption of this language is important as its suppositions have dominated elite thinking, particularly in the dominant Congress Party and the bureaucracy, since Independence.

Before examining the specifics of this discourse and its implementation in the 1950 Constitution, the question arises as to why it was western, rather than indigenous, ideas which provided the dominant discourse of the Indian nationalist elite. The answers stem from the same source; British intellectual and political power. Thus, the usage of certain ideas was either caused by, or was adopted in response to, British control. That it was a direct cause

can be seen by the educational background of the Indian elite, particularly the Indian National Congress.[3]

Indirectly, and more importantly, is the manner in which British rule, vaguely predicated on assumptions of home-rule and self-determination, required nationalist elites to respond using the discourse of nationalism (Flint 1983: 391-2). Adopting more "indigenous" ideas would lead to claims by the British that Indian elites were not yet ready for self-government. As Said argues, the colonial power was able to enforce its view of political development as scientific truth on the colonized. Thus that Nehru believed that "primordial" forces could be countered by western secularism is undoubted but the point is that he had no choice in this, were he to gain independence. Indeed, British rule privileged Nehru's position within the nationalist movement at the expense of more fragmentary religious or radical anti-British voices.

That the *Subaltern Studies* critique of this elitist historiography did not arise in the first generation after Independence suggests the hegemony both of the Nehruvian model and simultaneously of the Congress Party. After Independence, the relationship between the Congress Party and the nationalist movement led to a situation in which criticisms of the Congress Party implicitly suggested support for colonial rule, the leaders of the

---

[3] The founding generation of which consisted primarily of western educated lawyers, journalists and other modern professionals familiar with the evolution of constitutional government in the British metropolis and in the white settler colonies. (Moulton 1988: 22)

Independence struggle generally being synonymous with the leaders of the Indian National Congress.

The Indian Constitution of 1950 can be seen as an outcome of the varying, and at times contradictory, themes of the 1935 Government of India Act, the nationalist movement and the legacy of partition. But if the outcome was ambiguous, it is the ideas of secularism and liberalism that most clearly underpin the whole.

The Government of India Act provided 250 out of 395 Acts in whole or part of the Indian Constitution and continued the trend, initiated by the Simon Commission and the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms, of creating a liberal, Westminster style parliamentary system. Yet, as Jalal argues, in practice;

> the very bureaucratic "steel frame" of the British Raj that had been the bete noire of Indian nationalists, was adapted to serve as the constituent framework... the bureaucratic authoritarianism inherent in the colonial state structure remained largely intact. (Jalal 1995: 18)

That this was so can be placed in the context of the upheaval of partition and the structure of the nationalist movement. The use by the Indian National Congress of regional power bases and its need to present itself as representative of the whole of India encouraged the creation of a composite nationalism, conducive to the federal system suggested by the British reforms but held back by the strong residual powers held by the Viceroy. Partition and the resulting communal tensions, the need to incorporate the Princely states into Independent India and a belief that a strong state would encourage economic development (Hewitt 1987: 76) led to a more whole-hearted adoption of the tried and tested colonial system as

against other models (see section 2.3). Thus both the strong centralizing powers, held by the President, and the "steel frame" of the Indian Civil Service,[4] remained.

This centralizing tendency recurs, not just with regard to Presidential powers vis-a-vis state/centre relations, but in the actual location of central power. That is, the primacy given to Parliament, and more specifically to the Cabinet. Despite this, there was a liberal separation of powers, in part between centre and states but, primarily, at the centre between Parliament, the President and the Supreme Court, underpinned by a Bill of Rights, the last elements deriving from Western constitutional practice.

The preamble to the Indian Constitution defines India as a "Sovereign Socialist Secular Democratic Republic".[5] The constitution guarantees fundamental rights to its citizens and contains directive principles, outlining the manner in which India was expected to develop. These, however, are only guidelines and cannot be enforced.

At the apex of the liberal model lies the concept of individual citizenship, gained through birth rather than by religion and thereby a primary allegiance to the nation-state, rather than any religious authority. This system of rule envisages the government as a neutral

---

[4] Renamed the Indian Administrative Service after Independence.

[5] Amended by the Forty-Second Amendment of 1977 to "Sovereign Democratic Republic".

umpire protecting the rights of individual citizens and thus assumes a clear distinction between the secular and the religious, despite the manner in which pre-colonial rulers in India, whether Hindu or Moghul, had arbitrated in caste disputes.

The East India Company and the British Government guaranteed to continue "all the rights, privileges, and immunities which had been enjoyed under the previous Hindu or Muslim ruler" (D.E. Smith 1963: 72). Quigley argues that political legitimacy was given to the resolution of caste disputes under colonial rule. Although the British did not directly intervene in caste disputes, considering this to be the preserve of priests, arguments were generally resolved by civil servants who were, in the main, Brahmins by caste (Quigley 1993: 124-125).[6] This inevitably involved the British in the "traditional" *kshatriya* principles of kingship.[7]

Within the post-Independence Indian state, attempts to raise backward groups through, for example, reservations policies were expected to be withdrawn after an initial ten year period, as institutionalized inequalities were removed. This would occur both through

---

[6] Cohn supports this approach through reference to the first census (in 1871) which attempted to categorize Indian subjects within the four *varnas* or as Outcasts or Aborigines. Any disputes were to be resolved through reference to a list made by; "the outstanding Indian Sanskrit scholar of the time" (Cohn 1988: 245).

[7] See Quigley (1993) for a revisionist interpretation of the caste system, basing it upon Hocart's notions of Kingship rather than Dumont's purity.

political incentives and, more generally, economic advancement, based upon a socialist scientific model.

Nehru's views on backwardness, as well as religion, conform to the ideas of modernization theorists assuming that, being the natural world order, allegiance to nations would, over time, replace what was seen as primordial attractions to tribe, caste or ethnic group. Nehru's "secular modernist construct" (Inden 1990: 192) of Hinduism was based upon western ideas regarding the separation of Church and state and a resulting divergence between public and private spheres. Religion in India was held to be synonymous with "social backwardness, gross superstition and fanaticism" (D.E. Smith 1963: 152).

> Jawaharlal Nehru's secularism rested on the notion that religion is an erroneous view of the cosmos that will yield to more rational understanding as scientific thinking and economic growth advance. (Madan 1987: 747)

But although Nehru's personal philosophy was completely secular, he was not intrinsically opposed to religion. His vision of India was one in which the religious and the non-religious would equally be able to achieve their aims. Thus, secularism in the Indian context was simultaneously argued to be a positive indigenous attitude, based upon Hindu notions of tolerance, as well as on the more neutral western concepts of equalitarianism, the separation of church and state and the primacy of the latter. Radhakrishnan[8] argued in 1955 that;

> Secularism here does not mean irreligion or atheism or even stress on material comforts. It proclaims

---

[8] Hindu philosopher, Ambassador to Moscow and later President of India from 1962 to 1967.

> that it lays stress on the universality of spiritual values that may be attained by a variety of ways. (Quoted in D.E. Smith 1963: 147)

Thus all religions are true and enable an individual's personal spiritual realization. The Indian Constitution therefore expounded a positive version of secularism, supporting all faiths, rather than negating their importance.

The assumption that Indian nationalism could be inclusive to many different communities, based on territorial boundaries and administrative apparatus, rather than on notions of Hindu society, is often contradicted in the Constitution. Despite the overtly secular ideology, there are many features of the Indian Constitution which imply social benefits to group membership.

The debate regarding cow protection is one example of the articulation of the Hindu/Indian dichotomy, whereby religious affiliations are justified through a secular discourse.[9] Article 48 of the Constitution, one of the Directive Principles, states that;

> The state shall endeavour to organize agriculture and animal husbandry on modern and scientific lines and shall, in particular, take steps for preserving and improving the breeds, and prohibiting the slaughter, of cows and calves and other milch and draught cattle. (The Constitution of India: Article 48)

During the Constitutional Assembly debates, Mohammed Saadulla, Muslim League Chief Minister of Assam until

---

[9] And also perhaps of the role of myth: There is "absolutely no Vedic authority" for the sanctity of the cow, this belief stemming from the Mahabharata, in the fourth century A.D. (D.E. Smith 1963: 484).

1946, argued that he would have no objection to cow protection being contained in the constitution if its proponents admitted that the basis was religious, rather than economic (D.E. Smith 1963: 485). That religion was clearly the basis for this Directive Principle is clear, yet its articulation through economic rationality implies perhaps that, even at the conception of the Indian state, the secular, democratic discourse was being used by default to promote the interests of the Hindu majority.

The division between public and private spheres was adopted by the westernized elite as a necessity for India's secularism. Yet in large part, this was a response to British attitudes which, in an attempt to comprehend Hinduism, focused upon features comparable to Christianity such as the "ancient Sanskrit texts" (Metcalf 1997: 11) and the role of Brahmins as spiritual leaders (Quigley 1993: 83). The assumptions the British held regarding nationalism and the primacy of national identity over other allegiances required Indian nationalist leaders to separate public and private spheres. Through both the Constitution and in the years thereafter, this resulted in the empowerment of religious elites as their remit was seen to include certain spheres which were defined as private.

The retention of personal law[10] as an arena to be dealt with by religious authorities, rather than the state, dates from pre-British rule. Upon annexation of new territories, the East India Company assured its subjects that rights and privileges held by the previous

---

[10] For example, laws regarding marriage, divorce and inheritance.

rulers would be perpetuated. The religious functions performed by the old rulers were therefore continued by the British (D.E. Smith 1963: 72).

Interference with religion only occurred on humanitarian grounds and, although British policy was not always consistent, personal law was generally left to religious authorities.

> The Fourth Law Commission reported in 1879 that since this law was mingled with religion for the great mass of the people, no further codification was advisable. (D.E. Smith 1963: 276)

The Indian Penal Code (Sections 295-298) of 1860 restricts the freedom of religion when this affects public order, morality or health. Thus, for example, *sati* (widow-burning) could be opposed on humanitarian grounds.[11] Yet at Independence, there were three different and distinct laws regarding marriage, divorce, inheritance and succession.

Article 44 of the Directive Principles of the Indian Constitution states that; "The state shall endeavour to secure for the citizens a uniform civil code throughout the territory of India" (The Constitution of India: Article 44).

The Special Marriage Act of 1954, based in part on the act of the same name of 1872, was the first step towards this agenda; if marriage occurred between two people of different faiths neither personal law could apply, thus the act provided for "legal provision of

---

[11] The Moghuls attempted to prevent *sati* on similar grounds. The Sultans of Delhi introduced a licensing system, whilst Akbar appointed officials to ensure no compulsion was brought to bear on widows (Saxena 1975: 77-83).

marriages celebrated in repudiation of personal laws" (D.E. Smith 1963: 278). But this act was voluntary and only affected a very small percentage of the population. As Smith argues, before any uniform civil code could be drawn up it was necessary to codify Hindu personal law. The passage of bills regarding Hindu Marriage, Hindu Succession, Hindu Minority and Guardianship and Hindu Adoptions and Maintenance in 1955 and 1956 followed fifteen years of debates regarding their substance (D.E. Smith 1963: 280-281). This required the law minister in a secular state arguing for changes in religious law based on ancient Sanskrit scriptures.

N.C. Chatterjee, leader of the Hindu Mahasabha, argued that this codification was in itself communal;

> ...why is this attempt to change the personal laws confined to Hindu society alone? Is not this communal legislation repugnant to the clear directive principles of the Constitution that there should be a uniform civil code for all the citizens of India? (Quoted in D.E. Smith 1963: 286)

Similar arguments were given from the opposite end of the political spectrum. Acharya Kripalani of the Praja Socialist Party, for example, argued that the introduction of laws for just one community was itself undemocratic. (D.E. Smith 1963: 286) Despite these criticisms, the Guardian of Madras justified the changes thus;

> While Pakistan is reforming secular law to conform to traditional religion, India is legislating traditional practices to be brought into keeping with a modern progressive outlook. (Quoted in D.E. Smith 1963: 291)

That all these views are in some sense reflected in the constitution, through the Constituent Assembly

debates, suggests a degree of ambiguity regarding the meaning of India's secularism. These criticisms, along with further policy developments, will be assessed in the following sections.

2.2 Critiques of Nehruvian Nationalism

It is clear that the Nehruvian secular liberal model was the dominant force behind the Indian nationalist movement and the resultant Indian constitution but other strands of thought existed, criticizing both the theoretical basis and the implementation of the Nehruvian model.

Criticisms of Nehruvian nationalism on the grounds that it is ill-suited to the Indian polity have been made from various differing standpoints. Re-constructions of the role of secularism in the Indian state and consequent re-definitions of Hinduism in terms of *Hindutva*; Hindu society or Hinduness, can be seen in the strand of thinking running from Golwalkar and the R.S.S., through the *Jana Sangh*, to the present-day *Bharatiya Janata Party* (B.J.P.).

Golwalkar exemplifies the notion that Indian nationalism derives from, and is a product of, Hindu society. The R.S.S. interpretation of Hinduism relies less on Hinduism as a religion *per se*, than on an image of a Hindu society. Golwalkar aimed to expand the *Jana Sangh*, the party political wing of the R.S.S., to; "... a stage when the Sangh and the entire Hindu society will be completely identical" (Quoted in Jaffrelot 1993: 126).

This then raises two important questions regarding nationalism and religion; who can be a Hindu and what is the relationship between Hindu society and Hindu religion? Golwalkar argues that;

> The Hindu... has ever been devoted to Bharat and ready to strive for its progress and uphold its honour. The national life values of Bharat are indeed derived from the life of the Hindus. As such he is the "national" here. (Quoted in Pandey 1993: 251)

Savarkar, the father of Hindu nationalism (Varshney 1993: 230), similarly, claims that;

> A Hindu means a person who regards this land... from the Indus to the Seas as his fatherland as well as his Holyland. (Quoted in Varshney 1993: 230-231)

This definition explicitly excludes Muslims, Christians and Communists, whose allegiance lies extra-territorially (Pandey 1993: 253). Conversely, it can provide national membership to other groups whose religious identity originated in India, specifically Sikhs, Buddhists and Jains. This territorial, genealogical and religious (Varshney 1993: 231) definition of *Hindutva* assumes that; "Ethos/spirit is at the heart of Hinduism, which is at the heart of... Hindu culture... which is at the heart of the Hindu nation" (Vanaik 1997: 151). Given that the national identity is constructed, Vanaik argues that there is no essential national identity; "What it is and will be is what we fight to make it to be" (Vanaik 1997: 151).

Conversely, Varshney argues that different versions of nationalism are at issue. Indian secular nationalism could exist in conjunction with other affiliations (Varshney 1993: 230). However Hindu nationalism, as articulated by Savarkar and Golwalkar, is separate, distinct and in opposition to a secular Indian identity.[12]

---

[12] The implications of this relationship are important for the international relations of South Asia. As Embree argues;

Given these restrictions on citizenship, what would have been the attitude of a Hindu nationalist, rather than Hindu extremist, Indian state towards minorities? Varshney argues that the basis for Muslim citizenship revolves around assimilation on four counts;

> 1) accept the centrality of Hinduism to Indian civilisation; 2) acknowledge key figures such as Ram as civilizational heroes... 3) accept that Muslim rulers... destroyed the pillars of Hindu civilisation; and 4) make no claims to special privileges... (Varshney 1993: 231)

If the basis of Indian nationalism for Golwalkar and Savarkar derived from a particular conception of Hindu society, for Gandhi it derived from the innate spiritualism of India. Although this "romantic idealist" conception (Inden 1990: 72) has not affected the constitutional structure of Indian political activity, particular movements both before and after Independence have utilized, and been derived from, this particular anti-western, anti-scientific discourse.

Gandhi explained India's subjugation as a result of attempts to copy western materialist culture, rather than emphasize India's innate spirituality (Chatterjee 1986: 85-86). This led Gandhi, for example, to criticize industrialization since; "above a certain level [physical

---

> ...the pervasiveness of Indian (and here Hindu can be allowed as a synonym for Indian) culture tends to make Indians see the people of the subcontinent as a commonality, providing linkages at every level of life, while the other nations detect cultural imperialism in the Indian perception. (Embree 1974: 5)

harmony and comfort] becomes a hindrance instead of help" (Quoted in Chatterjee 1986: 87).

Gandhi believed that economic and political issues needed to be subordinated to a higher moral community. His critique of the legal system, in which lawyers advance quarrels rather than repress them, replicates the ability of the colonial state, through appearing neutral, to actually increase division (Chatterjee 1986: 91).

This view of morality was based upon an understanding of religion which Inden has described as; "a pluralist position that was... also religious and traditionalist in its orientation, but more innovative" (Inden 1990: 192).

Gandhi argued that;

> After long study and experience I have come to these conclusions, that (1) all religions are true, (2) all religions have some error in them, (3) all religions are almost as dear to me as my own Hinduism. My veneration for other faiths is the same as for my own faith. (Nehru 1946: 365)

Thus the Gandhian perspective suggested that, rather than attempt to replicate more advanced states, India needed to recognize its own essential spirituality. Just as he ascribed imperialism on the desire for greater economic prosperity, so political life needed to be subsumed to a communal morality rather than dominated by economic materialism. This theme recurs through the peaceful protests of the nationalist movement and later through Jayprakash Narayan and the "J.P. Movement".[13]

---

[13] The all-party movement, started in Bihar, opposed to the alleged corruption of Indira Gandhi from 1974-1975.

Vallabhbhai Patel espoused a more conservative economic and political approach than Nehru, accompanied by the use of Hinduism to justify these ends. Rather than devoutly believing in Hinduism, Patel used Hindu traditions; "as much out of convenience as out of conviction" (Rudolph and Rudolph 1987: 71). Hinduism was, to Patel, a consolidating feature about which the nation could be constructed and thus the accommodation to Muslims which was evident from Nehru and Gandhi was less apparent from Patel. At a speech in Lucknow questioning why Indian Muslims had not criticized the Pakistani invasion of Kashmir after partition, Patel stated;

> It is your duty now to sail in the same boat together. I want to tell you very frankly that you cannot ride two horses. Select one horse. Those who want to live in Pakistan go there and live in peace. (Gandhi 1990: 461)

M.N. Roy argued that Indian society needed to eliminate its religious outlook completely were a truly secular state to be created. Thus, in the Marxist view, not only should religion be excluded from the state apparatus but only with the exclusion of religion from any part of human consciousness could true freedom occur (D.E. Smith 1963: 156).

Critiques of the Nehruvian approach were derived not only from the dichotomy between the religious and the secular but in whether a liberal or more authoritarian form of rule was preferable for the Indian context. If the liberal model provides one notion of governance in India, another is that of the all-powerful sovereign, derived from Moghul and previous Empires such as those of Ashoka and the Guptas.

In this model the role of the supreme ruler; *Shah-an-Shah*, *Raja Dhiraja* or King of Kings, has been to adjudicate between competing groups. This viewpoint has appeared in the writings of Bengali nationalists in the nineteenth century, is reflected in the ideas of Subhas Chandra Bose and can be seen in justifications of the Emergency as necessary to maintain order and work against opposition attempts to incite rebellion and destabilize the unity of India (Government of India 1975). This view represents India as a combination of groups and factions, rather than individuals, in which governance is more clearly hierarchical and the divergence between high and low politics is greater than in western European societies.

This authoritarian, secular ideology is perhaps best represented by Bose and, had he lived after 1945 and established his Indian National Army on Indian soil during World War Two, the Indian state may well have developed differently.[14] Bose represented; "the realpolitik and extremist versions of Indian nationalism that flourished in Bengal and Maharashtra" (Rudolph and Rudolph 1987: 70).

> Writing in 1942 his state model was clear;
>
> There will be a strong Central Government. Without such a Government, order and public security cannot be safeguarded. Behind this Government will stand a well organized, disciplined all-India party which will be the chief instrument for maintaining national unity. (Bose 1997: 290)

---

[14] This would obviously have strengthened Bose's position. It could also have strengthened the position of the Communist resistance.

As Nehru, Bose favoured rapid economic development (Bose 1997: 207-208, 294), the perpetuation of Hindustani, written in the Roman script, as the national language (Bose 1997: 206) and the relegation of religion to an individual's conscience (Bose 1997: 290).

Bose's position has been undermined, to some extent, by both the dominant Nehruvian historiography and his relationship with Germany and Japan during World War Two. However, given the broad typography used here to exemplify differing strands of debate, his version of Indian nationalism is useful in demonstrating that opposition to Nehruvian notions did not only come from non-secular writers. Rather than the liberal model, Bose alludes to more ancient power structures. The supreme ruler was the predominant power in Moghul and Gupta Empires and in his proclamation of the Provisional Government of Azad Hind, Bose claims;

> the names of Sirajuddoula and Mohanlal of Bengal, Haider Ali, Tippu Sultan and Velu Tampi of South India, Appa Sahib Bhonsle and Peshwa Baji Rao of Maharashtra, the Begums of Oudh... among others - the names of all these warriors are for ever engraved in letters of gold. (Bose 1997: 296)

The vision of the state as a combination of factions can be seen as a development of this interpretation. Factions link low-level communities, through intermediate classes, to parliamentary elites. As Brass argues;

> factional loyalties provide the link between the parochial units of Indian society - family, village, caste - and the political parties.... It is something "more" than parochial politics... and something less than party politics. (Brass 1965: 114)

Washbrook has supported Brass' argument through an examination of politics in Madras in the late nineteenth

and early twentieth centuries. Washbrook suggests that, as political powers were transferred to Indians, certain local elites were able to dominate these structures. Thus, the limited introduction of a democratic process entrenched certain localized elites (Washbrook 1973).

However, the "attempted reduction of all South Asian politics - communalist, nationalist or other - to the play of self-interest and faction" (Pandey 1990: 14-15) has been criticised by Hardiman (1982) as being analytically weak and factually inaccurate, deriving from older orientalist discourses. Through concentrating on the elite, it ignores the subaltern. As a comprehensive theory of the state, the faction is far from complete but it does provide a useful analytical tool, demonstrating the importance of vertical links, especially in localities, and thereby a method by which hegemony can be enforced.

These debates are important given the perpetuation of India's democratic framework. The importance of nation-building in post-colonial states often resulted in one party rule, allowing the elite to enforce the official nationalist myths. In India, despite Congress hegemony, the existence of different ideologies amongst the "Founding Fathers" led to contested notions regarding the basis of Indian nationalism remaining within the political arena.

Furthermore, the Nehruvian version of Indian nationalism was not wholly predictable, but came to prominence in part due to the early deaths of the proponents of alternative models, Bose in 1945 and Patel

in 1950, and the legitimacy given by the British to this method of rule.

Many of the critiques of the Indian state derive from these earlier debates. Madan, for example, has argued that the usage of secularism in India has been misinterpreted and that religion takes on a completely different role in India than in Protestant western Europe where the idea of separation of church and state originated (Madan 1987: 754). Varshney however asserts that Madan's view of secularism fails to distinguish between types of secularism within the polity and that Rajiv and Indira Gandhi perverted the original Nehruvian interpretation (Varshney 1993: 247).

The *Subaltern Studies* critique argues that the prevailing elite nationalist discourse ignores, or distorts, many other forms of anti-colonial protest. Indian "nationalism" was much more of a mass movement, containing many different strands to those alluded to by Nehru and the westernized elite. The dominant historiography, derived from Nehruvian notions, has attempted to reconstruct both the story of the Independence Movement and previous Indian history, to provide a continuity between past civilizations and the contemporary Indian nation-state.

The nationalist historiography of India's elite is argued to bear little semblance to the experiences of the vast majority of India's population. Attempts to gain independence required the elite to adopt the language of the British to be recognized as able to govern themselves. As such, they failed to attract the support of the "masses". In other words, the notion of India as

recognized by the West, and indeed by India's elite, is derived from a western discourse and has therefore been unable to take root as the focal point of an individual's primary loyalty.

The necessity for this usage of western concepts has been explained by the feeling of the colonized that only through adopting the language of the colonizers would their demands for autonomy be heard. The problem, highlighted by the *Subaltern Studies* group, is that this elite historiography, whether Indian or British, has been adopted with differing emphases by academics both in India and Britain (R. Guha 1982: 1).

More than this, they argue that the accepted historiography reduces the role played by, or indeed fails to mention, movements of the "masses", instead describing decolonization either as a movement by which an "elite [led] the masses from subjugation to freedom" (Guha 1982: 1) or as a stimulus-response between the colonial and Indian (westernized) elites. Through empowering subaltern voices, agency is returned to individuals. One of the major causes of this type of analysis is the British assumption that, whereas European liberal democracies are based on rational individuals, India was perceived to be a land of spiritual holistic communities. This dichotomy undermines many of the assumptions made by westernizing nationalists with regard to India's nationhood.

Indeed, despite a common belief that political realities in India are different from those in the West, the framework within which politics takes place is based upon western concepts. In an attempt to counteract this

historiographical problem, attempts have been made to empower subaltern groups, enabling a post-modern critique that through imposing agency onto subaltern groups, it is almost impossible to avoid creating new essentialist notions (O'Hanlon 1988).

Partha Chatterjee's critique derives from the above debates and argues that nationalism was a natural development in the West but has no such intrinsic basis, and as such is unsuited, to the post-colonial World. Whereas in the West nationalism developed "naturally" through capitalist development (for example, Hechter 1977, Worsley 1984) or language and "print-capitalism" (Anderson 1991) in colonial states it was constructed as a language through which elites could take power from the colonial rulers, without those pre-conditions which existed in the West.

Chatterjee argues that enlightenment ideas, including the concept of nationalism, were introduced into the colonies through force. The combination of science, modernization and nationalist thought have led to the formation of nation-states in the Third World which have no real historical basis, leading to ethnic movements that, whilst being anti-state, also appear to be anti-modern and anti-capitalist. (Chatterjee 1986: 150)

Chatterjee cites the example of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (Bankim) "one of the first systematic expounders in India of the principles of nationalism" (Chatterjee 1986: 54). Bankim's attempts to construct and reify an Indian/Bengali culture and even his critique of western knowledge, argues Chatterjee, demonstrate his

adoption of certain western rational biases (Chatterjee 1986: 58).

This resulted in a massive degree of elitism within his arguments. If India's power stemmed from a synthesis of western scientific knowledge and indigenous spiritual awareness, then the "project of national-cultural regeneration" (Chatterjee 1986: 73) would involve the intelligentsia leading, and the nation following.

Said has argued that the assumptions of difference held by the colonial powers with regard to subject peoples were enforced through their political and intellectual power. This is epitomized by Bankim privileging certain western intellectual approaches over indigenous Indian traditions.[15]

Present debates about Indian nationalism stem from this dichotomy. Indian nationalists are divided between those, like Nehru and Subhas Chandra Bose, who believed that nationalism was a universal modernizing force and that its application in the form of secular political structures in India would lead to progress, and those who have argued that nationalism developed as it did in the West out of the indigenous features of the West. In India, different features should lead to a different type of nation. If the "essence" of the West was science, rationality and a resultant secularism, the essence of India was its spirituality. This then suggests that the

---

[15] Conversely, many of the modes of British rule were modelled on the previous Moghul forms of governance, particularly in relation to tax collection. The implications of this are particularly relevant to ideas of separateness in the northeast which never fell under direct Moghul rule.

basis for any sustainable nationalist project in India leads to a very different type of progress. Developed from this stands the viewpoint of those, such as Partha Chatterjee, who have argued that nationalism *per se* is western and therefore the actual nationalist project itself is unsuitable for India, there being no indigenous basis.

An assessment of these positions locates the sub-nationalist debate in northeast India in terms of an nationwide concern regarding the basis of Indian national identity. In particular, it implies the role of sub-nationalist developments with regard to notions of "unity through diversity". This recognition, and to some extent institutionalization, of difference provided the justification for Indian nationalism. However, the emphasis on difference was expected to decline through modernization, according to the Nehruvian model.

2.3 Communal Tendencies after 1950

That Nehruvian notions of secularism were not fully escribed onto the political system at Independence has been demonstrated. Although it was assumed that cultural divisions would decline over time as economic advancement occurred, many of the attempts to reduce differences through rights have either remained intact, or indeed increased in importance, since 1950. The scope of this development is wide-ranging and is demonstrated by, for example, the expansion of reservations policies and the enforcement of the provisions of the Sixth Schedule, both expected to decline over time (see section 2.4), and the coalition politics of the Congress Party. This section will examine how modernizing policies have resulted in

opposite outcomes, taking the examples of the Shah Bano case, the Fifty-Third Amendment and state reorganization.

That the 1950 Constitution contained certain collective rights based on group membership was clearly recognized, yet these were presumed to disappear after they had served their purpose and, through prescription, removed those inequalities for which they had been introduced. After Independence, separate personal laws for religious communities were expected to disappear as soon as acceptable common civil codes were available. Yet Acts of Parliament and specific events not only institutionalized these existing differences but in reality created more lines of division, at least in the short-term.

The causes of this trend are three-fold. Firstly, these policies were introduced to eliminate the handicaps of certain groups and abolishing them before they had achieved any notable results was clearly unlikely. Secondly, removing beneficial rights based upon group membership would prove detrimental to the electoral opportunities of the party so doing. Thirdly, the nature of governance, particularly under the Congress System, emphasized the position of elites within localized societies. The benefits to elites from their control over personal laws, political rights and defining group membership meant that they would oppose any attempted changes.

This consolidation of difference, although part of a long-term movement to the point at which common citizenship rights could be exercised, in the short term resulted in a position at which common citizenship

appeared to be more elusive. Over time, policies to prioritize backward groups have become more important than the ends for which they were originally intended.

The difficulties of establishing a common civil code in a democracy dominated by communal elites, particularly by a party relying on electoral support from those elites, was shown in the Shah Bano case. The Supreme Court's judgement in this case was that a divorced Muslim woman was entitled to support from her husband, against orthodox Muslim opinion in which a husband's financial responsibilities end after divorce. Coming soon after a court ruling that Ayodhya was a temple, not a mosque, the killings of Muslims at Nellie in Assam, and the Assam Accord, which threatened to deprive thousands of Muslims of their Indian citizenship, this ruling appeared to do more to fracture, rather than consolidate, citizenship of Muslims and Hindus.

As bye-elections showed a continuing shift of Muslim support away from the Congress (I) Party, Rajiv Gandhi passed the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Bill in 1986, which reversed the Shah Bano judgement and maintained Muslim personal law. Gandhi argued that it was not the duty of the government to arbitrate between Muslims (Rudolph and Rudolph 1987: 44-45).

Again, as in many other cases, the divergence between the liberal aims of non-interference with religious matters and the consequent effect of giving rights to certain groups, in a democracy, has led to

elites of groups ensuring the perpetuation of their rights.[16]

The notion of allowing religious authorities to legislate with regards to social issues which, in a western secular state would generally be left to politicians, can be applied to the tribal regions. The manner in which certain areas are allowed separate social legislation is applied to tribal groups, as well as Hindus and Muslims.

The Fifty-Third Amendment, for example, gained Presidential Assent on 14 August 1986. This prevented the application of any Act of Parliament in Mizoram which affected the religious and social practices of the Mizos. It further sanctioned the continuation of the Mizos' customary law and procedure. The administration of civil and criminal justice and decisions affecting land transfer could only be applied if a resolution was passed in the Mizoram Legislative Assembly. Other states and autonomous districts in the northeast were given similar rights,[17] further consolidating notions that tribals were

---

[16] Eriksen provides evidence of the difficulties involved in imposing relativist, rather than universal, social values. In Norway, Gypsies were not forced to attend school as it was seen to be "in conflict with their culture". In 1990-1991 an illiterate Gypsy took the government to court, blaming them for his illiteracy (Eriksen 1993: 143).

[17] In 1962 the Thirteenth Amendment of the Constitution invoked Article 371A to provide similar rights for the Nagas. The Twenty-Seventh and Fifty-Fifth Amendments provided other specified rights to tribals in Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh respectively.

being privileged and that through a portrayal of backwardness, benefits would be forthcoming.

State reorganization recognized the necessity of multiple identities in India; Nehru's unity through diversity. Yet through granting rights on the basis of language, rather than need as was the intention with reservations, a new usage for these identities was created. Liberal supporters argued that it was a further modernizing step, rationalizing administration through the use of common state-wide languages, yet support also came from groups wishing to monopolize their control of state power-bases.

In a region so linguistically diverse, the use of language as an ideological tool has a long history. It was seen in the attempted imposition of Urdu and Hindi as national languages in Pakistan and India (Jalal 1995: 225). The attempted transition from Hindi and English to solely Hindi as official language failed when the Official Language Commission reported that the present situation could not be improved. The Commission was established in 1955, at the same time as regional languages were gaining support through representations to the State Reorganization Commission. As Jalal argues;

> language presented itself as a useful mobilizing symbol transcending caste, clan and even class-based interests. It enabled social groups with privileged access to literacy and education to represent regionally defined interests. (Jalal 1995: 226)

Even under British rule, the state of Orissa had been created as a response to internal linguistic demands. The pre-Independence Congress Party, although committed to an Indian nation, was organized on linguistic lines, as opposed to official governmental

divisions, implying a reorganization of states upon achieving power (Morris-Jones 1967: 46). Yet in the name of national unity this did not occur (Jalal 1995: 224).

After Independence, protests by Telugu-speakers, Maharashtrans and speakers of Malayalam and Tamil led to the establishment of a committee comprising Jawaharlal Nehru, Vallabhbhai Patel and Pattabhi Sitaramayya which argued against linguistic states on the basis that national unity would be jeopardized. Protests in Andhra, about which the report had conceded a case could be made, led to the creation of Andhra Pradesh in 1953. To prevent further protest the States Reorganization Commission was established. This recommended the division of southern India, but neither Bombay and the Punjab[18] nor the northeast.[19] Protests in Bombay, the war in Nagaland and more peaceful protests in the Punjab led to the division of Bombay into Maharashtra and Gujarat in 1960, the separation of Nagaland from Assam in 1963 and the division of the Punjab into Punjab, Haryana and Himachal Pradesh in 1966.

Groups which are perceived to have benefitted within the Indian state, gaining statehood or reservations policy, have done so on the basis of shared cultural characteristics. Thus claims made for economic improvement are based upon highly stigmatized traits; language or caste, rather than less stigmatized

---

[18] On the basis that there was opposition from linguistic minorities within the proposed new states.

[19] The report recommended the unification of the northeast on the grounds that the small states were unviable (see section 5.2).

ideologies. As discussed in Chapter One, the articulation of cultural identities requires the existence of an Other against which group membership can be judged and will therefore increase division, as against creating unity, as perceived by Nehru.

Notions of Assamese identity were encouraged by many of these developments, as the Other against which the Assamese would be defined, were themselves consolidating their membership due to these policies. Thus Muslims and tribals were perceived to be able to emphasize their identities for economic, political and social gain and by so doing underlined their differences from the Assamese. This further increased the impression of politics and resource allocation as a zero-sum game.

2.4 Consolidating Difference?

Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes

The effects of the various measures which aimed to remove communal divisions through the granting of benefits and rights on the basis of group membership are disputed. The basic premise for reservations policy is; "that persistent and cumulative caste related inequalities need to be corrected through compensatory discrimination" (Guhan 1992: 1657). Upper-caste Hindus, who have most to lose from preferential policies have exaggerated the costs of preferential policies, belittled caste division (Guhan 1992: 1657) and generally focused on the apparent unfairness and inequity of discrimination. It is also argued that the benefits of reservations have gone to more advanced divisions of backward groups who have the

resources to take advantage of opportunities available,[20] or even to upper castes attempting to "de-Sanskritize" by adopting the names of lower castes (Guru 1986: 33).

It is further claimed that reservations policy has institutionalized certain caste divisions, an argument which Mitra believes demonstrates insufficient understanding of the nature of caste (Mitra 1994: 64). Even if only one member of a backward group advances through reservations, the effect is "to sever the link between *jati* and occupation" (Mitra 1994: 64) and refute notions of destiny manipulated by some oppressing groups.

However, as with state reorganization, personal laws and so forth, reservations policy implies privilege on the basis of cultural group membership. Although often apocryphal, the idea that it is more advanced backward castes which benefit from reservations, intensifies other individuals' desire to articulate a cultural identity to gain social, economic or political benefits.

All the restrictions enforced on the liberal model, reservations and so on, were expected to disappear and as such were initially introduced provisionally for a ten year period only. Their continuous reapplication suggests that they have not solved the problems as intended but meanwhile have led to the institutionalization of important political power-bases and as such cannot be removed.

The ideal of removing difference through benefitting less privileged groups is most clearly witnessed in the reservations policy for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled

---

[20] The "lion's share" problem (see Gallanter 1984: 270).

Tribes and Other Backward Castes. The Indian Constitution itself presents reservations as one of the major blocks upon which it is based. Articles 330 to 334 provide that seats in both national and state assemblies be reserved for scheduled castes, tribes and Anglo-Indians. Article 335 allowed for reservations to occur in government service as long as administrative efficiency was not affected. Reservations were not to exceed 22.5%. Articles 15 and 16 both guarantee equality by the state, but both contain riders;

> Nothing in this article... shall prevent the state from making any special provision for the advancement of any social and educationally backward classes of citizens or for the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes. (Constitution of India: Article 15)
>
> Nothing in this article shall prevent the state from making any provision for the reservation of appointments or posts in favour of any backward class of citizens. (Constitution of India: Article 16)

Article 17 abolished untouchability and banned its practice, making any implementation of untouchability an offence. (Constitution of India: Article 17)

The inevitable outcomes of this set of policies are twofold. Firstly, if opportunities are increased through classification as "backward", groups will attempt to prove themselves backward to gain greater resources. Furthermore, any attempt to abolish communal divisions, whilst simultaneously supporting those groups through positive discrimination, will inevitably give the divisions a greater political significance, particularly in a democratic framework. In Assam, despite a vast

backlog in employment for tribals and scheduled castes in state employment, the;

> Asamiya bourgeois press has been largely successful in grossly distorting the situation by creating an image of "privileged" tribals in state employment. (Hussain 1993: 178)

It has further led to claims of rights on caste status by other religious groups.[21] As the *Report of the Backward Classes Commission* in 1955 observed;

> The Government of India recognized certain castes among the Hindus as backward and offered special scholarships, concessions and privileges to those communities. This led the Muslims and Christians also to assert that although their religions were fundamentally different and that theoretically it is (sic) opposed to caste, in practice their society was more or less caste-ridden. (Report of the Backward Classes Commission 1955: vi)

The numbers involved give some credence to the fact that reservation policy will be a popular vote-winner. It is also clear that this is extremely divisive. Backward and scheduled castes and tribes account for around 70% of the population, Muslims a further 11% (The Economist 8 October 1994). Forward castes, "Brahmins, Thakurs and a handful of others" constitute about 17.6% of the population (Jalal 1995: 204). In the south of India only 3% of the population are Brahmins. The fact that under V.P. Singh's implementation of the Mandal Commission Report reservations only apply to new recruitment in government service, excluding promotion and the armed forces, the actual gains for backward classes, and losses

---

[21] Despite the Constitution being avowedly secular, religious affiliation has been used as a qualification for preferential treatment (Gallanter 1984: 305, D.E. Smith 1963: 322).

for others, are almost trivial,[22] was overshadowed by the upper-caste response.

Secondly, because so much is at stake for individuals basing claims on their caste/tribal identity, the courts have been placed in their "traditional" position (Quigley 1993: 93) acting as arbiters in caste disputes. Their approaches have varied between what Gallanter calls the "pragmatic or empirical" method, recognizing that multiple identities can occur, and a "formal or fictional" approach, assuming that groups are "mutually exclusive and hierarchically ranked" (Gallanter 1967: 119). The latter method, following the British interpretation of Indian society, suggests a further departure from a secular ideal.

Furthermore, the actual purpose of Reservations Policy was contradictory. Verrier Elwin, anthropologist and Chairman of the Commission on Scheduled Castes, aimed to maintain the distinctiveness of tribal groups and privilege them through Scheduled Tribe Status to enable this to be achieved. For Elwin, certain areas were to be kept separate for the Tribals to maintain their ancient existence. In his work on the Baiga, Elwin argued that without maintaining separateness, the Baiga;

> ... will become indistinguishable from ordinary villagers! Their fine physique will be sapped by the introduction of child-marriages... they will sink from their proud office of lords of the jungle to the very bottom of the social scale; half-way between civilization and an emasculated tribal life,

---

[22]We can estimate the current O.B.C. share in central government to be 15%... if staff strength grows at 1% per annum, a prospective 27% reservation will improve it... to 18% in 30 years. (E.P.W. 1-8 August 1992)

> they will practice the worst features of both. (Elwin 1939: 519)

The area needed to be controlled by a Tribe's Commissioner, an expert, acting as an intermediary between the tribal headman and the legislature. Despite the general support for "isolationism" amongst the British, upon Independence the prevailing view was for these tribes, through reservations, to be brought within the mainstream of Indian nationalism. As Vallabhbhai Patel commented;

> Mr Jaibal Singh has apprehensions that the present laws which afford protection and security to the tribal people will be removed. I do not see why there should be any such apprehension. ...I think that it should be our endeavour to bring the tribal people to the level of Mr Jaibal Singh and not keep them as tribes, so that, 10 years hence, when the Fundamental Rights are reconsidered, the word "tribes" may be removed altogether when they come up to our level. It is not benefitting India's civilisation to provide for tribes. (Constituent Assembly Debates Volume III: 456)

Reservations policies derived in large part from Colonial attempts to rationalize the caste system through the Census, resulting in stricter stratification, as census "supervisors were supposed to instruct the enumerators in how to classify responses" (Cohn 1988: 244). Yet the British belief that caste relationships held India together (Metcalf 1997: 119) had the effect of dividing groups along caste lines. This created a framework through which, to gain resources from the state, cultural group membership has been necessary.[23]

---

[23] In response to British stratification, the Indian census does not contain caste information in order not to exacerbate caste differences. But, as Guhan argues, preferential schemes cannot be accepted unless they are

In the northeast, a further hindrance to assimilation was provided through the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution (see also section 5.2). This allowed for separate District and Regional Councils for certain tribal areas, with the ability to regulate money-lending, trading and property ownership. It allowed the Governor of Assam to set up Commissions to investigate the development of the areas and provided financial resources from the centre to any state with Scheduled Areas. Again, this was attacked from both sides. Some criticized the Sixth Schedule for not going far enough, ignoring tribals in the plains and the tea gardens.[24] Others, such as Kuladhar Chaliha, a veteran Assamese Congressman, argued that it went too far;

> I think we are heading to a difficult situation, and if the Tribes cause disturbance to us we have to thank ourselves. But there is one redeeming feature and that is paragraph 21 of the Sixth Schedule [which leaves the power to amend the Schedule at any time to Parliament].... Therefore we should be very careful and it should be amended at the first sitting of parliament; otherwise we would be heading towards ruin and there will be so many pockets, so many Ulsters where there will be trouble. (Constituent Assembly Debates, Volume IX: 644-645)

Ghurye argues that it is not only the British influence in treating Tribals differently which resulted in these policies, but their misunderstanding of the

---

based on reliable data and reliable data cannot be collected for fear of exacerbating caste feelings (Guhan 1992: 1659).

[24] For example, Scheduled Tribal Commission Member Basumatari (see Ghurye 1980: 353). Basumatari also opposed the state reorganization of the 1970's on the same basis (see section 5.2).

nature of Hinduism, which was reflected in the ideas of India's Founding Fathers. Whilst the British believed that the Tribals were non-Hindu, Ghurye argues that they were generally, save in parts of Assam,[25] gradually adopting Hindu customs and as such were slowly becoming integrated into the Indian mainstream and that Scheduled Area policies prevented the creation of an Indian national identity.

With regards to Assam, he argues that;

> ...Assam stands poised for a break-up on the score of the Scheduled Areas and Scheduled Tribes much greater than was sanctioned by the Constitution. And the ball, it must be firmly borne in mind, was set rolling by the special treatment given to the Nagas and the Scheduled Tribes of the North East Frontier Tract. The embryo-force of the movement was... provided by the District and Regional Councils for Assam tribal areas sanctioned in the Constitution. (Ghurye 1980: 345-346)

These policies of reservations and protection for both caste and tribal groups encouraged a feeling of communality rather than integration, which in northeast India was vital given its peripheral position with regards to the rest of the state. Whereas previous divisive policies could be blamed on the British, their consolidation through the new state sent conflicting messages. The ability of tribal groups to emphasize difference was constitutionally sanctioned and the resulting state reorganization was encouraged by this.

Policies towards tribal groups were predicated upon varying impressions and assumptions. The first view, as expressed by Elwin in particular (for example, 1939), is

---

[25] The idea that Assamese tribes were in some ways different and more backward is debatable (see below).

based upon relativist assumptions that the tribals, or aborigines, should be protected and their traditional customs maintained. This view has influenced policies through the maintenance of separate tribal laws and territorial protection through, for example, Inner and Outer Line policies and latterly in the Sixth Schedule and the granting of statehood for various tribes in the northeast.[26]

The 1931 Census was the first to enumerate the "primitive tribes", But throughout the colonial period the British had treated certain areas differently. In 1782, the Rajmahal Hill district was removed "from the jurisdiction of ordinary courts" (Ghurye 1980: 71). The Santal Parganas District was similarly treated after 1855 and these disparate provisions were enshrined in the Scheduled Districts Act of 1874. In the 1919 Government of India Act these regions became Backward Areas, in 1921 the Line System was introduced[27] and in the 1935

---

[26] Policy with regard to the Inner and Outer Line districts was summed up by Lord Hardinge thus;

> Our policy in regard to these tribes has hitherto been of non-interference, except in cases of (a) outrages on British subjects; (b) violation of the "Inner line"; and (c) danger to the interests of people dwelling inside the British border by reason of the proximity of disturbances outside. (Letter from India to Crewe 21 September 1911, Quoted in Mehra 1979: 29)

[27] The Line System was divided, in Assam, into the Outer Line, comprising the areas now forming Arunachal Pradesh, then the North East Frontier Agency, and the Inner Line, comprising the tribal hill regions of the northeast.

Government of India Act the regions became Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas.[28]

These actions were justified both for administrative efficiency (Ghurye 1980: 70) and to protect tribals from "exploitative or demoralizing contact with more sophisticated outsiders" (Gallanter 1984: 147). In Assam, the Legislative Assembly Council elections of 1939 were largely fought on the basis of the perpetuation of the Line System. This was advocated by Saadulla's Assam Union Muslim League and opposed by the Congress Party;

> ... Maulavi Mannawar Ali's resolution on the "Line System" which Government had evolved to control unrestricted settlement of immigrants from Eastern Bengal mainly with a view to avoid friction and clashes with the indigenous people. The resolution demanded abolition of thissystem. (Assam Assembly Congress Report 1949: 10)

Whereas the theoretical purpose of the Line System was to protect tribals from "corrupting" influences, in Assam these corrupting influences came to be synonymous with East Bengali Muslim immigrants. The scale of migration was scarcely affected by partition and because of the line policy immigrants were channelled into specific areas, particularly the Brahmaputra Valley, into which immigration was sanctioned.

The second view is that through their contact with British colonial rule, the tribes had already been

---

[28] The Excluded areas, contemporary Arunachal Pradesh, Naga and Lushai (Mizo) Hills and North Cachar Hills, were directly controlled by the Governor. Partially Excluded Areas; Garo Hills, Mikir Hills, Sibsagar and parts of contemporary Meghalaya all had some representatives in the State Assembly but legislation regarding them was passed only at the Governor's discretion.

affected, thus any customs that were to be maintained were not the "essential" features of the tribes, these having already been corrupted.

This approach, as argued by Ghurye and Assamese elites, for different reasons, suggests that there is no core set of tribal values which could, or should, be perpetuated. All the tribes have interacted both with other tribes and with non-tribal groups. As Ghurye argues with respect to the Sanskritization of (non-Assamese) tribals, so Assamese elites argue that the tribals of the northeast have developed as they have due to interaction with the Assamese. This approach implies that the backward position of the tribals is a result of being "protected" from modernization and interaction by British colonial rule. Less protection would enable them to develop. This universalist argument forms the basis for reservations policies for tribal groups, advancing them through mainstream Indian society.

Both views are criticized by Majumdar, who believed that the development of "civilization", as well as the right to cultural choice, were essential. Thus, tribes required assistance to enable them to withstand cultural invasion;

> For him, Verrier Elwin's crusade in favour of leaving the tribes alone and G.S. Ghurye's counter campaign to treat them as indistinguishable from backward Hindus represented a Rousseauan romanticism on the one hand, and a political posture on the other. (Madan 1995: 27)

Despite being intrinsically contradictory, these policies result in a necessary classification of membership of tribal communities, and definition of their

"culture" with the intention of removing or continuing perceived difference.[29]

These policies have encouraged a chauvinistic Assamese identity to develop in response to the transfer of certain political and economic powers from the Assamese to the tribal community. The corresponding articulation of tribal identities to secure these rights contrasted their tribal identities with those of the plains Assamese. This emphasized and helped produce a more distinct Assamese identity.

---

[29] The difficulties of defining such a culture are fraught with difficulties. See Gallanter (1984: 293), for example, over the debate regarding the status of a tribal who adopts Christianity.

Chapter Three

The Construction of Assamese Identity; From the *Mahabharata* to the Burmese Invasion

3.0 Introduction

The historical period examined in this chapter has provided specific events, such as the attempted Moghul invasions, and general trends, such as immigration, which have been utilized by the contemporary Assam Movement to define membership of the Assamese community and ways of behaviour for that community. The Assam Movement argues that these events provide the origins of the notions of Assamese kinship and identity; what could be called, retrospectively, the ethnogenesis of Assamese nationalism. Consequently, these events are examined and utilized by political actors to provide metaphors for the contemporary situation in Assam.

This section will analyze those metaphors most commonly used to provide justifications for the ways in which the Assamese should act. It will assess the impact of these ideas, and examine the manner in which historical artifacts, Hobsbawm and Ranger's "invented traditions", have been used. Thus the aim is not to provide a complete history of Assam; rather to examine those ideas which are seen to provide historical precedents for ways both of interpreting and of acting in the present. Through an understanding of the dominant discourse, some sense of the nature of the construction of what it is to be "Assamese", in the opinion of present-day Assamese elites, will be realized.

Through the analysis of events which occurred prior to British colonization, this chapter may appear to be endorsing the primordial view of ethnicity; describing those events which stirred Assamese group consciousness in "pre-modern" times. Contemporary Assamese nationalists would certainly argue that their community derives directly from these ancient groups[1] but it is the argument of this thesis that there was no definable Assamese group during this period. Instead, it will be argued that events during this period have been used retrospectively to provide a historical basis for the membership and behaviour of a specific contemporary Assamese community and identity.

Furthermore, the utilization of historic myths by political actors in the present will be shown to have the purpose of achieving specific political ends, consciously or not. Thus references to, for example, the Battle of Saraighat do not exist for their own sake, but rather to establish or reinforce a specific cultural outlook and attitude.

As with much of the literature concerning this topic, the manner in which authors have investigated the pre-colonial period is often highly partial; pro-Indian writers are seen to concentrate on certain events, pro-Assamese nationalists on others. But this is not to say that certain ideas are mutually exclusive. As has been argued by, for example, Manor (1996) and Jalal (1995),

---

[1] In the same manner of "illegitimate appropriation" as the standard histories of India which start with the Indus Valley civilisations (Kaviraj 1992: 17).

multiple identities are highly developed in South Asia. Identities based on caste, village, language, religion as well as the Indian nation, for example, are all available for use in different circumstances, reinforced through notions of "unity through diversity". However, the manner of the discourse regarding Assam is, at times, qualitatively different since some of the cultural markers of the Assamese group are directly opposed, rather than a complement, to the markers of a mainstream Indian identity. Given that Assamese identity is itself constructed from the various cultural artifacts available for manipulation by politicians, historians and so forth, it is equally important to examine why the focus is so clearly on exclusive, rather than integrative, historical events.

Historical events cannot be used to emphasize difference without a definable group membership. This is not to say that there will not be problems and shifts of allegiance at the boundaries of the group. For "Assamese" to be used as a distinct cultural category, it must be clear who is, and who is not, an Assamese. Thus, from this, it is clear that the separate histories, of Assamese, Bengalis and so on, in themselves emphasize difference. Once membership of the different groups is defined, however loosely, interactions between the two groups and the outcomes of this interaction, can be utilized to integrate or divide the groups further.

With regards to the Assamese, the recurring historical themes articulated are of continuous attempted foreign oppression and powerlessness with regard to control of their own destiny, particularly in relation to

neighbouring Bengal. This is often attributed to the political and economic power of Bengalis within Assam. Simultaneously, and despite this, there is a common feeling of Assamese superiority towards Bengalis. This is demonstrated by the less rigid and hierarchical caste structure of Assam, due to the particular Vaishnavite version of Hinduism practised in Assam, the relationship with the tribals and the much greater agricultural productivity of Assam in comparison to Bengal. These ideas recur throughout many of the particular historical events which are investigated in this chapter as defining events in the construction of an Assamese identity.

These historical events include those occurrences which histories of Assam regard as the most important issues, as well as other events which appear less far-reaching. The common linkages between all the events discussed are that all these issues recur both in popular consciousness and in academic writings about the current situation to justify notions of Assameseness, and contemporary references to these events will demonstrate this.

The role of Assam in the ancient epics is important as it suggests that, in as much as India was "more than a geographical expression" in the pre-Moghul and British periods, Assam was an integral part of this polity. The first section relates to the ideas discussed in the previous chapter referring to the basis of Indian nationalism and the continuing dichotomy between a modernizing, scientific "western" nationalism, and an indigenously developed Indian nationalism which, in large

part, would rely on Hinduism and consequently the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*.

The attempted Moghul invasions convey the opposite message; that the Assamese were never a part of this particular "all-India" empire. The second section will also assess other marginal comments about linkages that did exist between the Assamese and Moghuls and will examine scholarship assessing the structure of Moghul rule throughout India, to establish how marginal Assam was to the Moghul Empire. Although the main aim of the thesis is to demonstrate the manner in which historical events are used in the present, it would be naive to attempt this without some assessment of the validity of the claims made by present elites.

The version of Vaishnavite Hinduism practised in Assam, coupled with the resulting looser caste structure and the image of Shankardeva as the founder of modern Assamese nationalism, has lent powerful images to Assamese consciousness. Religious identities are portrayed by their proponents as more "real" than other cultural identities, representative as they are of some "higher truth", but their manifestations are as easily available to justify external relationships, methods of behaviour and understanding of others. The third section will investigate the articulation of the difference between Assamese Vaishnavism and other versions of Hinduism.

The fourth section investigates specific relationships with the (non-Bengali) Other. Artisans had long entered Assam to meet the requirements of the various kingdoms, particularly the Ahom. These early

immigrants, it is argued, assimilated Assamese customs, language and so forth, thus enabling contemporary Assamese nationalists to contrast readily and, indeed, usefully between early and later immigrants. They are further portrayed as having entered Assam for the benefit of the Assamese people, rather than solely for their own enrichment. The actual "truth" of this claim is less important, in terms of contemporary political developments, than its popular perception as fact.

The relationship with tribals is even more confused. Some tribals[2] now argue that notions of Assameseness derived from the constant interaction with tribals that occurred in the pre-British period. In this view the tribals are as important in the development of an Assamese identity as the Assamese themselves, both identities being the outcome of a specific relationship. To the tribals, the assimilation which has occurred has been due to the Assamese adoption of tribal customs, such as non-vegetarianism.

Others, particularly the Assamese elite, would differ from this position, arguing that the Assamese are by definition more advanced and that any linkages have been solely one way, with the tribals borrowing cultural artifacts from the Assamese. This is but one example of the fuzziness at the boundaries of the Assamese community. Since Independence, specific policies such as reservations, the continuing Inner and Outer-Line policies and the Sixth Schedule (discussed in section

---

[2] For example, Jayanta Rangpi, Autonomous State Demand Council (A.S.D.C.) Member of the Lok Sabha, for Karbi Anglong Constituency (Interview: New Delhi 6 July 1996).

2.4) and, more recently, state reorganization (see section 5.2) have all given greater rights to tribal groups at the expense of a common northeastern identity, tribal identities having been articulated in terms of an anti-Assamese sentiment. This follows Verrier Elwin's classic theory of isolating and perpetuating the tribal customs of the northeast (see section 2.4). In this way, difference, rather than commonality, has been emphasized, thereby increasing the tribal-Assamese division.

The final historical metaphor to be examined is that of crisis. Many communities, particularly those which see themselves at risk of cultural take-over, or indeed minoritization, create myths to consolidate the group. Commonplace is the idea that the major threat comes from within the group itself; the idea of the debauched French Second Empire, for example, implied that military weakness could be attributed to a decline in moral standards, without which German invasion would have been impossible. The myth representing the Assamese fear of cultural annihilation is the Mayamaria revolt, quickly followed by, and in large part the cause of, the Burmese invasion in the early nineteenth century, both of which left the population massively diminished and the economy in ruins. The contemporary usage of this idea and its effect on the Assamese will be assessed in this section.

3.1 The *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*

Discussion of the ancient epics in contemporary Indian political debate owes as much to recent Hindu revivalism as to the secular/religious dichotomy regarding the basis of Indian nationalism (see Chapter Two). It is perhaps stranger that it is used as part of the argument that

Assam is an integral part of India. After a brief outline of the evidence given to suggest that Assam was an important link in the sub-continental span of the epics, the analysis will provide some explanation as to the utilization of this sparse evidence.

The use of the ancient epics as contemporary political tools is only valid if it is accepted that the basis for "India" stems in some manner from Hinduism. As discussed in Chapter Two, it was not seen to be contradictory for the secular Congress Party to utilize territorial limits derived from ancient religious texts and myths, in particular the idea of *Bharatvarsha*; "the land of the mythical Vedic ruler Bharat" (Jalal 1995: 26). For example, K.M. Munshi, one of those who framed the Indian Constitution, argues that the importance of the epics stems from the preeminence of spirituality in Indian nationalism;

> The greatness of Iran, of Greece, of Rome and of Byzantium faded within a few centuries... On the other hand the historical annals of China and India record millenniums. The world importance of nations cannot be measured in the long run in terms of the men they butcher in battle, of the wealth of which they rob others, or of the destruction they bring to civilisation. It has to be reckoned in terms of the knowledge, beauty and culture which they contribute towards man's possessions in his journey towards self-realization... in the vitality they conserve in order to equip man for a higher destiny. (Munshi 1964: 5)

This Indian spirituality manifests itself in Hinduism, in the attaining of dharma or higher consciousness, and;

> ...behind the social, cultural and aesthetic achievements of the Aryan culture, stands the

> influence of the two immortal works: the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. (Munshi 1964: 8)

This ambiguous relationship, particularly concerning the racial implications of the Aryan myths with regard to the Dravidian south of India, suggests the importance of the epics in Indian nationalism. Attempts to portray the Assamese as an integral part of the remit of ancient Hindu society show a paucity, rather than a surplus, of material to argue the case; but what is important is that this evidence is used at all.

That is to say that the explicit assumption is that the Indian identity is based on spirituality, rather than secularism, and the implicit suggestion that this is thereby inextricably linked to Hinduism. More than this though, portrayals of the Hindu epics imply that India's ancient glories were "disrupted by a stream of foreign invaders" (Jalal 1995: 255) The context of the epics provided a bench-mark against which independent India could be judged.

How then is information regarding Assam's place in ancient India articulated? Madhu Limaye's work, *Contemporary Indian Politics*, demonstrates the rather blunt usage of the epics. The preface states that the work attempts to;

> examine the diverse aspects of the Indian polity in their proper historical setting. A central thread runs through all these essays, that is the desire to see a strong secularised India wedded to social justice and amity among its various religious communities and linguistic groups. (Limaye 1987: vii)

The chapter referring to Assam however gives examples from the *Mahabharata* and the *Puranas* which, although containing a rider that this is "a mythological

account...", argues that "... it goes to prove that Kamarupa was part of the Indian politico-cultural system".[3]

The first example given by Limaye comes from the *Puranas*;

> According to the Kalika Purana, Naraka was brought up by King Janaka of Videha. After the former attained the age of 16 he conquered the Kiratas and established himself as the ruler of Pragjyotisha. Naraka was killed by Krishna, and in response to the appeal of Naraka's mother he installed Naraka's son, Bhagdatta, on the throne of Pragjytisha. The two epics... also mention Naraka, who founded Pragjyotisha. (Limaye 1987: 299)

The most oft-quoted event from this period is the battle of Kurukshetra, at which Bhagdatta, the ruler of Assam, and his allies, the Kauravas, were defeated by Arjuna's armies. This example recurs throughout introductions to Assamese political literature;

"The Mahabharata indicates that..." (Dubey 1980: 62).

"Even the epic Mahabharata mentions about..." (Hussain 1993: 26).

"The Sabha Parva of the Mahabharata narrates..." (Limaye 1987: 300).

"Both the Ramayana and the Mahabharata make distinct references to Pragjyotish and Kamrup" (Singh 1987: 12).

> Kalidasa in his epic Raghu Vamsha also describes the triumph of Raghu over the King of Pragjyotisha....

---

[3] Pragjyotisha and Kamarupa are the ancient names for Assam. The latter was the accepted name of the region at least until the Ahom invasion and survives as Kamrup, a contemporary district of Assam.

the King of Kamarupa (also called Pragjyotisheshwara) who used fierce war-elephants to fight his enemies, but the same King had to surrender, with all his elephants, to Raghu who was mightier than Indra. The King of Kamarupa then paid worship to Raghu with a garland of gems. (Limaye 1987: 300-301)

Doctor Sohoni argues that these references;

> establish that Kamarupa and its kings had been brought within the orbit of the Gupta empire and the Indian cultural mainstream by Samudragupta. (quoted in Limaye 1987: 301)

The implication of this is clear, yet few would explicitly argue that this would be the basis for the post-Independence Indian national identity.

The question is, why should any literature examining present-day political problems in Assam feel any compunction to quote from texts reportedly 3000 years old? These references would not appear to provide the context within which the Assam Movement developed. Clearly, any explanation of Assamese ancient history needs to quote from these sources, due to the lack of any other material. However, the works given as examples are not attempting to do this, rather to set the scene for an explanation of events in the 1980's.[4]

Despite the emphasis of the "high discourse" on notions of secularism, Hindu spirituality has recurred as a focus of identity for the "low discourse", and has been utilized by the elite for this purpose, as Munshi demonstrates. This spirituality permeated into the higher

---

[4] Assamese and Sanskrit are the only south Asian languages with an indigenous word meaning "history". "Assam is also the first in India in systematic history writing, which started in the 13th Century" (A.K. Das 1982: 2).

discourse, particularly during the late 1970's and 1980's, due to the decline of secular Congress ideology, and manifested itself in the popularity of the television version of the *Ramayana* from 1987[5] and later the *Mahabharata*.

Benedict Anderson argues that the expansion of a singular state-wide print-media, replacing older dialects with a single vernacular, was an integral part of the creation of a national consciousness in western Europe, homogenizing linguistic differences (Anderson 1991: 67-82). Similarly, the homogenization of the ancient epics, which had been multi-form religious texts (Lutgendorf 1995: 244) would appear to achieve similar ends in India. Through being broadcast on Doordashan, which was perceived as speaking to, and for, the elite, some legitimacy was provided to the low level discourse from the "secular" elite.

It would seem valid to suggest that, despite the acceptance of the liberal model of governance, in both popular and elite perceptions the role of spirituality in mass identity is paramount. Assam is thus legitimated as an integral part of the Indian state not just through lying within its territorial spatial boundaries but through its shared spirituality (for the Assamese nationalist response to these claims see section 3.3).

---

[5] Conservative estimates suggest that viewing figures were between 40 and 60 million for the programmes (Lutgendorf 1995: 223).

3.2 The Moghul Invasions and the Ahom Kingdom

Discussion of the Moghul invasions of Assam clearly represents the opposite viewpoint to references to the ancient epics and it is the idea of the separateness of Assam which has been used by elites through the articulation of this history.

According to Limaye; "Assam was the only part of Sanskritized India which never fell under Muslim rule" (Limaye 1987: 302). The extent of the Sanskritization of the northeast could well be questioned (e.g. Hussain 1993: 26-27) but the fact that India's contemporary nationhood is never argued to be based on the geographical area controlled by the Moghuls suggests that this memory is used in a different manner.

The full history of the events surrounding the Moghul invasions are debatable, in large part due to the lack of complete records, but it seems likely that the final encounter, the Battle of Saraighat in 1671, marked the endpoint of a three power conflict between the Ahoms, who were to eventually triumph, the Koches, the preceding regional power, and the Moghuls. The first Muslim invasion of Assam had occurred in 1198, under Bakhtiyar Khilji, and the final invasion, which culminated in the Battle of Saraighat, was the sixteenth invasion attempt.[6]

Edward Gait's *A History of Assam* provides the accepted history of Assam's medieval period and the manner in which this is written, focusing primarily on

---

[6] The Assam Movement has referred to the present conflict as the "Eighteenth war of Independence". The seventeenth refers to the anti-colonial nationalist movement.

the Ahom Kingdom, has helped give a retrospective power to the belief that the Ahoms are the "original" Assamese. Through detailing the histories of the various other main groups, Koches, Kacharis and Jaintias separately, a greater emphasis on division rather than regional similarity is given. One explanation for this focus is the maintenance of written historical records by the Ahoms, in contrast to other groups in the northeast.

From the thirteenth century to the end of the fifteenth century the Kacharis were the primary power in the northeast, controlling the south bank of the Brahmaputra from Dkallon to Dikhu, the river Dikhu forming the boundary between the Ahoms and Kacharis (Gait 1992: 237). A battle was fought on the river Dikhu in 1490, following an emigration of Kacharis from the eastern Ahom region, in which the Kacharis were victorious, but the growing Ahom power meant that over the next 30 years the Kachari kingdom was forced back to the Dhansiri river (Gait 1992: 238). By 1536, the Ahoms had pushed the Kacharis into the North Cachar Hills, leaving the whole southern bank of the Brahmaputra to the Ahoms (Gait 1992: 238).[7]

---

[7] The Kacharis are also known as Bodos. In the 1980's, and particularly since the signing of the Assam Accord, the Bodos, led by the All Bodo Students Union (A.B.S.U.), pressed for greater autonomy within the state of Assam. The power of the A.B.S.U. declined after the signing of the Bodo Accord in 1993, and the Bodo Security Force, which followed a more extreme path, pressed for independence.

Ahom power in the northeastern region of Assam was similarly developed in this period. In 1523 the Chutiyas, who controlled the region around contemporary Dibrugarh and Lakhimpur districts, were subjugated.

However, the rising power of the Koch kingdom led to the Ahoms accepting the suzerainty of the Koch king and the loss of a large tract of territory on the north bank of the Brahmaputra in 1563. Ahom preeminence returned after the Koches lost a war with the Moghuls, and this region fell under the direct rule of the Moghuls.

The Koch kingdom provides another oft-quoted line of argument of interaction between the northeast and the rest of India. When the founder of the Koch Kingdom, Vishwa Singh, died in 1540, it is reported that his two sons, Malla Deb and Sukladhvaj, were studying in Benares (Dubey 1980: 62).[8]

Similarly, it is often claimed that Madhav Dev, a Vaishnavite Saint of the sixteenth century, wrote of being proud of being born in "Bharata" (A. Guha 1980: 1701). The implication of these India-wide linkages is clear, but the fact that they are so often mentioned suggests more a lack of alternative evidence to show linkages than that the northeast was fully entwined in sub-continental events.[9]

---

[8] Actually, it was Singh's two eldest sons who were studying in Benares. The youngest, Nar Singh, proclaimed himself king in his brothers' absence. Upon their return they rose an army and defeated him (Gait 1992: 47).

[9] Interestingly, the defeated son possibly became ruler of Bhutan which, "in ancient times... occasionally at least" formed part of the Kingdom of Kamrup (Gait

If the defining characteristic of India were the Gandhian notion that it is a land of villages, then it would seem fair to argue that for most regions, demonstrating nation-wide linkages would prove difficult. The point is that other regions of India do not particularly need to prove that they are an integral part of the present state, whereas in Assam various minor linkages recur throughout academic texts, as though to prove that such relationships exist.

From 1615 to 1638 the Ahoms directed their energies against the Moghul invaders. The collapse of the Koch kingdom, which formed a bulwark between the Ahoms and the Moghuls led the Ahoms to sign a treaty ceding Guwahati to the Moghuls, paying war indemnities and retreating to Namrup.

This position continued until the 1660's when the Ahoms attempted to take advantage of Moghul weakness during the war of succession between Shah Jahan's four sons Aurangzeb, Dara Shukoh, Murad and Shuja.

The ascent of a new king, Cakradhvaja Simha, to the Ahom throne, marked the beginning of the end of Moghul dominance; four years of war against Aurangzeb's general, Raam Simha of Ambar, eventually led to a crushing Ahom

---

1992: 47). This linkage is generally not recognised in contemporary political articles. Similarly, the Duars, roughly synonymous with the contemporary district of Kokrajhar, were governed by a form of dual-sovereignty by the Bhutanese and the Ahoms (Lahiri 1994: 257). Full British annexation only occurred after the Treaty of Sinchula, following the Anglo-Bhutanese Wars of 1864-1866 (Gait 1992: 303). Under the treaty the British paid an annual sum to compensate Bhutan for the loss of the Duars. This money is still paid by the Government of India (Robinson 1989: 164).

victory at Saraighat in 1667. Ahom dominance of the northeast followed until 1769, when Ahom rule was finally weakened by the Mayamaria revolt, which was thus indirectly to blame for the subsequent Burmese and British invasion.

The Battle of Saraighat, and the actions of the Ahom leader, Lachit Barphukan, in particular, are argued to be the proudest moments of Assamese history and as such have been used as contemporary metaphors by the Assam Movement. Barphukan is alleged to have killed his own uncle, in charge of building a section of ramparts, for allowing his troops to rest. According to Bhattacharya, Barphukan said;

> Rest!... The country is going to the ruins (sic) and you are still talking of rest. You have to either work or die. This is no time for rest... My uncle is not greater than my country. (Bhattacharya 1990: 43)

The implicit messages for the present situation of Barphukan's words and actions are clear; the idea of country or nation, the fear of crisis, and a stricture not to follow the Assamese trait of indolence (see section 4.2). As Das writes of Lachit Barphukan, "even today his name sparks patriotism and courage amongst the Assamese masses" (A.K. Das 1980: 12).

During the protests of 1979, protestors at one rally in Guwahati hoisted;

> a huge silhouette portrait of Lachit Barphukan, the symbol of bravery and patriotism... the overall message of the meeting was that, if the Assamese people want to live with honour, they must win this battle. (A.K. Das 1982: 71)

This history is worth noting for the purpose of this thesis for two reasons. Although this is not the place to

assess the manner of Moghul rule throughout India, it is frequently argued that the Moghul state primarily existed for the purposes of taxation and war. Given the vast sums of indemnities and tributes paid by the Ahoms and other groups in the northeast to the Moghuls, these links do not appear to be as different in the northeast from other parts of India where local rulers maintained jurisdiction.

> It is possible that revenue was claimed, at least from some of them, in the form of a stipulated annual tribute, as had been the practice in earlier periods; but the obscure records which alone are available for the territories of the more important chiefs can also be interpreted on the theory that the emperor claimed nothing beyond loyal service, including of course the periodical presents which etiquette required. (Cambridge History of India 1937: 464-465)

For example, it is recorded that the Koch kingdom in the late sixteenth century was a vassal of the Moghuls and;

> in 1578, according to the Ain-i-Akbari, Nar Narain[10] renewed his demonstration of obedience to the imperial throne and sent 54 elephants and other valuable presents to Akbar. (Dubey 1980: 62)

Secondly, there is nothing intrinsic in the pre-British period which suggests that the Assamese are in any way a singular definable cultural group. Some traits were shared, particularly the version of Hinduism (see section 3.3), but politically there was no all-encompassing "Assamese" group. The Assam Movement has retrospectively commandeered Ahom history as the early history of Assam, and the Ahoms as the original Assamese.

---

[10] The name assumed by Malla Deb, Koch King from 1540-c.1581.

That the Ahoms were the most powerful group in northeast India immediately prior to colonization is clear but the use of Ahom myths as representative of the "Assamese" has been constructed retrospectively. One of the most important links is the belief that the very name Assam derives from the Ahoms.[11] As Dubey argues;

> There is a belief that the appellation Assam for this area is based on Ahom ("S" becomes "h" in Assamese and "a" becomes "O" in the eastern Indo-Aryan languages). (Dubey 1980: 62)

That said, those events which are seen as important at this time by present-day Assamese are the Battle of Saraighat, the clear message of which is that foreigners can be expelled if the Assamese work to this end with determined leadership. The internalization of the idea that the Assamese are workshy appears as political parties urge their followers to work for the benefit of the Assamese, in language implying that without strictures encouraging this, it will not occur;

The fact that the political history shares many similarities with that of the rest of "Moghul" India, is ignored. The contemporary role of the Ahoms in Assamese society is noteworthy for the manner in which they are now seen to be separate from mainstream Assamese society, and particularly the Assam Movement. As with many originally non-Hindu ruling groups, the Ahoms, previously Buddhist, on conversion to Hinduism, received *Sudra* status. After losing their political rights to British

---

[11] Alternative viewpoints are that the term Assam derives from the Sanskrit *asama*, meaning "peerless" (for example, Rafiabadi 1988: vi) or is a corruption of the Thai *cham*, meaning "undefeated" or "conquerors" (Kakati 1941: 2).

colonization, new economic structures and forms of taxation reduced their economic power, such that after Independence they received Other Backward Caste status, whilst petitioning to be recognized as a Scheduled Tribe.

For Gait, it was their full-scale conversion to Hinduism that marked the end of Ahom dominance, as;

> By accepting a subordinate place in the hierarchy of Hinduism, not only did the Ahoms lose their pride of place and martial spirit, but, with a less nourishing diet, their physique also underwent a change for the worse... no one, looking at an average Ahom of the present day, would suspect him of being the descendent of a race of conquerors who, though small in number, gradually extended their rule over the whole of the Brahmaputra valley and successfully resisted the assaults of the Moghuls. (Gait 1992: 174)

This demonstrates two important and generic features of British rule. There is a focus on physical characteristics and also a suggestion that these traits were not inherent but derived from the adoption of a different system of cultural values.

The separation of the Ahoms from the rest of the Assamese community was encouraged by the British. The Ahom Association, later the Ahom Sabha (Gassah 1992: 20), was established in 1893 and in 1912 two members of the Ahom Association were designated as representative of the Ahom community by the government and given seats in the Assam Legislature (Bose 1989: 95).

The *Ahom Mongolian Tai Parishad*, a pressure group for the Ahom Community in the post-Independence period, developed into a political party, the *Ujani Assam Rajya Parishad* (Upper Assam State Council) (U.A.R.P.) which was founded in 1967 in Garhgaon, capital of the Ahom Kings (B.P. Singh 1996: 100). The U.A.R.P. contested three

seats in the 1969 election. Its platform was for the creation of an Ahom homeland in Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh and Sibsagar. This was combined with a criticism of the establishment of the first oil refinery in Naringi, Guwahati, rather than in Upper Assam, where the oil was produced. The party failed electorally as it failed to secure enough support from non-Ahoms, although it did establish itself as the party to which "the majority of Ahoms and Chutias owe their support" (Chauhan 1972: 376).

The relationship between the Ahoms and other Assamese was again shown during the machinations of the Congress (I) Party during the early 1980's. As Sanjib Baruah writes, following the ministry of Anwara Taimur;

> The choice of Gogoi as chief minister in January 1982 was an attempt to limit the damage of the erosion of influence of ethnic Assamese officials, reinforcing feelings of minoritization. Gogoi, an ethnic Assamese, was Ahom by caste, which was another potential weak link in the Assamese ethnic coalition. (Baruah 1986: 1197)

The result of these machinations was that, despite historical notions of Assamese identity being based upon the historic "myths" of the military triumphs and political power of the Ahoms, those Assamese with a direct genealogical link to the Ahoms are actually campaigning for a separate homeland on the basis of their caste and cultural difference from the other "ethnic" Assamese. The same situation occurs, more vociferously, with regard to the Kacharis/Bodos, raising an interesting issue as to who are the Assamese? As Anthony Smith reports, with reference to modern Greeks;

> "descent" was seen in largely demographic terms; or rather, cultural affinity with Byzantium and ancient Greece (notably Athens) was predicated on demographic continuity. Unfortunately for the

> classicist Hellenist myth, the demographic evidence is at best tenuous, at worst non-existent. (A.D.Smith 1991: 28-29)

The difference between Greek and Assamese origin myths is that the group to which the myths relate in the Assamese case is still in existence and articulates its separateness from the "Assamese". Despite this discontinuity, the importance of the Ahoms as metaphors at least for the present movement is undoubted. Two of the sparks for the foundation of the Assam Movement (see section 6.1) are directly related. In July, 1978, rioting broke out over an;

> obscure piece of research in a departmental journal of the Dibrugarh University, misconstrued to reflect the author's anti-Asamiya attitude. (A. Guha 1980: 1706)

M.L. Bose, the author, wrote that rumours that he had tried to create communal disharmony and "malign the Assamese people" were due to a misunderstanding that he had; "tried to prove the numerical minority of the Assamese people in the state" and had "held the Ahoms responsible for many social evils in the Brahmaputra Valley" (Bose 1989: 7).

Not only was the preservation of certain interpretations of history important but the racial links of the Ahoms with southeast, rather than south Asia, were utilized in constructing difference. Later in 1978, the Gopinath Bardoloi Soccer Cup in Guwahati witnessed an attempt by some activists from the All Assam Students' Union to "harass and demoralise the team from Calcutta" (Nag 1990: 131).

During the final, between East Bengal, Calcutta and the Port Authority, Bangkok, the Assamese chauvinists supported the Thai team;

> who were more like "our ancestors, the Tai-Ahoms". To great jubilation... the Thais soon led 2-0...Later the Bengalis drew level, went on to win the match and in a gesture that blotted the name of the tournament for all time to come, one of their players took off his shorts to display his backside to a disappointed crowd. (Nag 1990: 131)

This use of the image of the Ahom kingdom as a metaphor by the present Assam Movement demonstrates not only the ability of identities to be manipulated, but that any primordial link is insufficient, and indeed unable, to explain the use of historic myths in identity creation.

The use of these historical images in popular literature is common, as it is in elite explanations. For example, in 1958, the *Asom Jatiya Mahasabha* (Assam National Conference) placed the immigration problem in this historical perspective, arguing;

> that Assam has survived by passing through many travails. (1) The Moghuls... (2) The Burmese... (3) The British by tagging Sylhet round her neck... (4) the Saadulla's Muslim League Government... (5) The British Cabinet Mission... But at every time the Assamese fought heroically against every such attack... Now it has become a plan of people who could be defeated by 12 Turkish cavalry soldiers and whose motherland has been given away to Pakistan, to influence and rule over Assam. (Asom Jatiya Mahasabha 1958: 1-2)

The links between the historical and the present are clearly witnessed through this articulation of anti-Bengali sentiment. Unlike the Bengalis, and against all odds, the Assamese are argued, historically, to have been masters of their own destiny. It is solely inertia and

lack of leadership which has prevented them from taking their rightful place in affairs in the northeast during the last 150 years.

3.3 Shankardeva and Neo-Vaishnavite Hinduism

The articulation of religious differences consolidates notions of Assamese separateness from Bengal.[12] The vision of Shankardeva as the founder of Assamese nationalism, resemblant of the retrospective portrayal of Jeanne d'Arc as the founder of French nationalism (A.D. Smith 1986: 180), recognises his use of the vernacular Assamese language and suggests the contemporary Assamese focus on language as the key cultural signifier.

The emphasis on the "Saintliness" of Shankardeva (1449-1548) (Cantlie 1985: 134) and the looser caste system, is reminiscent of the India-wide emphasis on the spiritual rather than the secular. Religious identity in Assam, at least amongst caste-Hindu Assamese, is believed to be superior to that elsewhere in India on the grounds that it is less divisive. In popular perception, there have never been; "retrogressive social practices such as dowry, Sati, caste and communal conflict" (A.K. Das 1982: 2).

During the 1920's, Gandhi is believed to have suggested that the campaign against untouchability was unnecessary in Assam, since Shankardeva's Vaishanavite reforms had effectively dispelled the worst excesses of

---

[12]Sreenivasa Murthy argues that;

> Though some would regard the Neo-Vaishnavite movement of Assam as an off-shoot of Bengal Vaishnavism. the two schools are independent of each other. (1973: iii)

the caste system. Gandhi's attitude towards Assam varied over time and much of his early writings suggest that it was more the backwardness, rather than the liberal attitudes, which attracted him. He wrote that "Assam impresses one as altogether a different sort of land" (Gandhi 1966: 18) and that "few reforms have been introduced... and consequently the people have saved their wealth and preserved their prosperity" (Gandhi 1966: 54).

These impressions represent a shift from his earlier position in which he;

> compared the Assamese people to the Coles, Bhils and Pindaris in an article in Young India in 1908. On [his] visit in 1921, Pandit Hemchandra showed him Assamese literature, art and fine hand-woven clothes... Gandhi... gracefully corrected himself. (A.K. Das 1982: 1)

The differences between Hinduism in Assam and elsewhere in India will be analyzed in this section and, more importantly, in terms of this thesis, the manner in which these differences have been portrayed.

Despite continuous migration into Assam by various groups from China, Burma, Tibet and India since ancient times, Hinduism was the dominant religion, although many groups engaged in Sanskritization continued to use; "...certain rituals and practices of their pre-Hindu days together with the Sanskritized rituals and practices" (Hussain 1993: 28).

Before Shankardeva, Shaktaism predominated in the Brahmaputra Valley, but the India-wide *Bhakti* movement, articulated by Shankardeva in Assam, led to the popularity of Vaishnavism.

The Assamese version of Vaishnavism is similar to that practised elsewhere in India in as much as it is monotheistic and "Visnu is worshipped as the supreme God" (Sreenivasa Murthy 1973: 9).

> Vaishnavism has certain features which distinguishes (sic) itself from Saivism. In the first place it is thoroughly monotheistic. The second important feature is that Visnu assumes different forms or Incarnations (avatara). The word Avatara means "descent". It signifies that in order to present to us a higher ideal of life God brings himself down. (Sreenivasa Murthy 1973: 11).

> Assamese Vaishnavism follows the path of devotion (bhakti) based on the teachings of the Bhagavata Purana. (Cantlie 1985: 134)

The major tangible distinction of the Assamese version, due to Shankardeva's reforms, are the use of *Satras*, or monasteries.

> Soon after his [Shankardeva's] death, his disciples established centres of worship, called Satras, which provide the permanent organization of the sect. A Satra consists of a guru and his disciples initiated by him. Physically it comprises the house of the guru, a large prayer hall for daily worship called a Name House and, in some cases, rows of huts for celibate devotees who have renounced the world. (Cantlie 1985: 134)

> There are estimated to be over six hundred Satras distributed throughout the State. Worship is chiefly congregational, different castes combining to sing hymns in the vernacular before the Bhagavat, into which the God is invoked for the duration of the performance. The hymns consist largely of the many names of God and performances of Name, as it is called, are held on all seasonal festivals, rites de passage, and other contingencies of life. (Cantlie 1985: 135)

The Name Houses, or *Namghars*, have played an important part in village life not just for purposes of

worship, but have been used for village assemblies, meeting places for discussion and at "one time they tried offenses by local villagers and were usually inviolable" (Hazarika 1995: 43). They have thereby provided an additional arena of public space unavailable in much of India, and in themselves emphasize a concrete difference from other regions.

There are further nuances to Assamese Vaishnavism which are played upon to focus solidarity. One implication is that it is an indigenous movement, which of itself improved Assamese society;

> Assam presented a sorry spectacle on the eve of the revival of Vaishnavism in Assam. In politics it was an age of disintegration... In the sphere of religion, the period distinguished itself for the notorious practices of Tantricism... Above all, there was no social solidarity because of the baneful effects of the caste system. (Sreenivasa Murthy 1973: 44)

Shankardeva's philosophy emphasised discipline and morality, and attacked ritual and tradition for its own sake. The result of these tendencies is that Assamese Vaishnavism is seen to differ in some senses from the more "fatalistic" mainstream Hinduism;

> Success in life either worldly or spiritually is impossible without great effort or heroism. This fact is recognised and emphasised by the Assam school of Vaishnavism. (Sreenivasa Murthy 1973: 63)

> Perhaps the most far-reaching effect of this movement though, is in the actual manner that the religion is practised;

> According to Shankardeva, one man is higher than another not through his birth but only through his own love and sympathy. There is only One God who is the origin of all, the distinctions of caste and creed vanished for him and he saw humanity as one large family, and all men as brothers... he gave up

> the use of Sanskrit and started his preaching in the language of the common man and thus laid the foundation of modern vernacular literature in the province of Assam. (Sreenivasa Murthy 1973: 67)

Thus Assamese Vaishnavism allows for an easier conception of the secular and the religious than is possible with much of Hinduism, since worship proceeds more separately from general morality.

Cross-cutting identities have made long-term cultural unity for political purposes an extremely rare event in south Asia. As Manor argues; "heterogeneity within individual states means that serious threats to break away seldom arise" (Manor 1997: 466). In general, when they have arisen, they have been short-lived due to the difficulty of maintaining internal cohesion. The "success" of this method of organization in Assam could well be ascribed to the lack of serious caste-based division and fluidity of caste boundaries in northeast India.

For example, one of the foremost tales of this period used to demonstrate caste mobility in northeast India is that of the War-Brahmins, quoted by Bhuyan;

> During the invasion of Assam by the Koch general Chilarai, the Ahoms dressed up their soldiers in the guise of Brahmans, each wearing a sacred thread and seated on a cow, the killing of a Brahman or of a cow being tabu (sic) to a Hindu. Chilerai... desisted from attacking the Ahom army. But the social consequences... resulted in serious confusion in society. Most of these "War-Brahmans" refused to give up their sacred threads; they began to live the life of Brahmans to all intents and purposes, and claimed the privileges and respect due to that superior caste. (Bhuyan 1949: 20)

Brahmins, although influential, do not dominate the social hierarchy. Other high-castes are equally

influential, whilst all non-Brahmins are classed as *Sudras;* "among whom there is considerable inter-caste mobility; and there are practically no untouchables" (Datta ed 1994: 13). Furthermore, castes are not related to professions, and "caste-based disabilities are few" (Datta ed. 1994: 13).

Despite the mass support for Vaishnavism, the Brahminically controlled Shataism continued. Ahom kings patronized both groups but towards the end of their rule began to favour the latter (leading to the events discussed in section 3.5). Vaishnavism encouraged the development of; "the Asamiya language, literature and performing arts like dance and drama" (Hussain 1993: 29). Shankardeva's description as the father of Assamese nationalism stems both from his providing certain stigmatized differences from non-Assamese societies and providing the environment within which these differences could assert themselves.

Despite Assamese elites emphasizing the fluidity of caste boundaries within Assam, serious caste and religious conflicts have occurred. Despite the general assumption that division is less common than elsewhere in India (for example, B.P. Singh 1996: 5, A.K. Das 1982: 23), the Mayamaria rebellion (see section 3.5) and the Vaishnavite reform movement of the 1930's partially refute this impression. The latter was a movement by non-Brahmins, criticizing the rituals that had "corrupted" Shankardeva's original religious message. Followers did not recognize; "the category of caste" (Cantlie 1985: 157) and opposed the rights and privileges claimed by Brahmins. The Assamese emphasis on religious harmony

ignores divisions which have occurred but, as elsewhere, this reflects the importance of popular perception.

3.4 Who are the Assamese? Pre-Colonial Immigration and the Relationship with Tribal Groups

Assam's contemporary political problems are blamed in large part on immigration and particularly on the lack of assimilation of recent immigrants into Assamese society. It seems unsurprising that it is argued that earlier, pre-British immigrants into Assam somehow adapted to the Assamese "way of life", forsaking their old customs and becoming accepted as Assamese, and thus contrasting with later unwanted immigrants.

Those areas in which pre-British immigrants and other later groups such as tea plantation workers, are seen to have adapted implies those cultural traits which it is necessary for more recent immigrants to adopt if they are to be accepted into Assamese society.

Conversely, there are no true "indigenous" Assamese, most Assamese having entered, in various waves, over the last 3000 to 4000 years (Gait 1992: 3). Any that entered prior to the Ahom invasion of 1228 are considered the original inhabitants, in large part because their arrival cannot be accurately dated, and any later, including the Ahoms, are often represented as immigrants.

Indeed, it is generally accepted that the Assamese category is not derived from blood ties but rather it is a civic category, using the distinction between German and French nationalisms. Notions of the Assamese community are closely related to territory; it is an

archetypal "sons of the soil" movement. Being Assamese is primarily justified as a relationship to the land and more recently to the administrative unit. Whilst cultural markers such as language are clearly vital, the fact that more recent migrants are seen to have extra-territorial affiliations, to West Bengal or Bangladesh, these early immigrants were welcomed due to the fact that they had renounced any other ties.[13]

Both Gait and Bhuyan agree that this immigration was important, the former stressing that it predominated under certain "good" Ahom rulers, in particular Rudra Singh, who constructed stone bridges with the help of Bengali masons and "imported many artificers from Bengal" (Gait 1992: 171). Bhuyan argues more generally that;

> The Ahom rulers encouraged men from India to come and settle in Assam, provided their introduction was of advantage to the country. Artisans, craftsmen, weavers, clerks, accountants, scholars and saints, both Hindu and Muslim were freely admitted, and occasionally brought by special arrangement with the rulers of Hindustan as there was an inadequacy of such men in Assam. But these licensed foreigners, after having come to Assam, had to cut off all connection with their mother country, and to become assimilated with the Assamese in language, manners and racial sympathy. They became subjects of the Assam government like older inhabitants. (Bhuyan 1949: 57)

Thus, Bhuyan highlights four areas of integration necessary for acceptance into the Assamese (Ahom)

---

[13] Note the similarity of this position with the argument by Golwalkar, for example, that the Hindu is defined by his (sic) religious attachment to religions originating in India, in contrast to civic notions of Indian Nehruvian nationalism.

community; language, manners, racial sympathy and lack of extra-territorial affiliation. Of the recent immigrants it is the tea-garden labourers who have most clearly followed this pattern and have generally, though not completely, been accepted by the Assamese community. The temporal context of Bhuyan's writing is important in that he is able to perceive of a secular and religious divide, such that Muslims are not inherently seen to hold extra-territorial affiliations.

The debate over whether Muslims are a part of Assamese society has become more vociferous, particularly after the massacre at Nellie. Hussain (1987, 1993) provides perhaps the strongest arguments for Muslim acceptance in suggesting that Muslims were an integral part of pre-colonial society, numbering one-sixth of the population (Hussain 1993: 29) and claiming that "obviously there were no Muslim and non-Muslim conflicts in colonial Assam" (Hussain 1993: 29-30). But in supporting the claims of "Asamiya" Muslims, Hussain ignores the arguments against more recent illegal immigrants allowing the R.S.S. and Hindu nationalists to focus solely on these (as articulated by B.J.P. Secretary, J. Singh 1984).

The point being that there is no "essential" definable Assamese community. Acceptance by elites of borderline groups in one period of history does not necessarily mean that this implies acceptance in a different period. The Assam Movement has attempted to focus any articulation of grievances against recent Bangladeshi immigrants on their illegality, rather than religion, but Hindu nationalists are able to (correctly)

point out that they are also Muslim. This inevitably leads to the potential for excluding previously accepted "Assamese Muslims" from the contemporary Assamese group (see also section 5.1).

One further feature of Bhuyan's analysis is perhaps most important; these foreigners were brought in by and for the Assamese rulers. They posed neither an economic nor a political threat to the indigenous Assamese. That this was the case, made them more likely to be accepted by the Assamese community. These immigrants were generally disparate, without large supporting communities and this made them more likely to repudiate previous ties and adopt Assamese customs. Again, this can be contrasted with the contemporary situation of Bengali Hindus and Marwaris, who are economically more powerful, and Bengali Muslims, who maintain their previous allegiances.

Notwithstanding the fact that defining the Assamese in this period is virtually impossible, the interaction between tribals and "Assamese" is more fraught with difficulty. The tribal relationship is perhaps more real and widespread than the artisan immigration but controversy over how it has affected both sides, particularly given the recent developments over reservations policy and the Sixth Schedule (see sections 2.4 and 5.2) have made definitive statements more difficult.

What does seem justifiable is to claim that both groups have borrowed from each other; Brahmins in Assam are one of the few Brahminical groups to eat meat, whilst the tribals economic circumstances are dependent upon the plains-dwelling Assamese. However, whereas the Assamese

are more prone to regard themselves as the rightful "masters" of the tribals, the tribals argue that it is their influence which has produced an inclusive Assamese community. In their view, being Assamese relates to the intricate relationship between different peoples in one of the most heterogeneous places in the world (see section 5.4).

Evidence for this is provided by analysis of folklore of various tribal groups in northeast India;

> ... we have a whole range of folklore material of the narrative genre which exemplify such awareness and consciousness [of "commonness" and "togetherness"] and that, too, from communities which have normally been associated by outsiders, including scholars, with remoteness and exclusiveness, both physical and cultural. In fact, the degree of openness and catholicity of view contained in many tribal myths and legends is simply staggering. (Datta 1994: 27)

Origin myths of many tribal groups give explanations not only of their own origins but those of other tribal, as well as non-tribal plains Assamese.

These issues have resurfaced over issues such as state reorganization, the present problems of Karbi Anglong and the Bodos and language policies, most tribals preferring English to Assamese.

It would not seem far-fetched to suggest that had the Bodos or Karbis been the dominant regional power when colonization began, it would be the Ahoms who would have been protected by Inner and Outer-Line policies and defined as tribals, and not the Karbis, Bodos and so on. Any reading of the historical literature does not suggest that different groups were living isolated existences, rather that most communities were to a greater or lesser

extent "pre-modern". The British belief that certain groups, such as the Nagas, were particularly backward due, for example, to practising cannibalism, marked them for special attention, but generally it seems clear that all these groups interacted economically and culturally.

The fact that the Ahoms in the early British histories of this period fought "military campaigns", whilst the Nagas went on "head-hunting missions" implies more about the British, assuming that the "rulers" of a region were by definition more advanced than the ruled and that within each community there were rulers and ruled, than that there were any intrinsic differences between the various groups at this time. The Ahoms, it should be remembered, were originally a Thai tribe, arriving in the northeast in 1228.

3.5 Notions of Crisis

> The soil of the Brahmaputra Valley is fertile, but its climate is damp and relaxing so that, while the people enjoy great material prosperity, there is a strong tendency towards physical and moral deterioration. (Gait 1992: 7)

Notions of crisis are prevalent in many communities, formed in opposition to other groups, and historical memories incited to protect the group's rights against the other. The period from 1769 until the final British invasion is without doubt the Assamese "dark ages", when external invasions and internal religious civil war decimated the region's population.

According to the 1820 *Description of Hindostan*, the Mayamari rebellion developed out of a growing rift between the spiritual and the secular in Assam, due to the rising powers of the former;

> About 1770, the power of the spiritual teachers had achieved such strength, and their insolence had become so intolerable, that the reigning Raja, with the view of curbing their pride, burned a building that had been erected contrary to the law, by one of them named Mahamari, who guided a multitude of the lowest and most ignorant of the people. (Description of Hindostan 1820: 746)

The rebellion continued during the reign of the following king, Gaurinath, who was forced from the throne but, due to the protection he received from Lord Cornwallis, was returned to the throne in 1793, by Captain Welsh and 1100 Sepoys. As the British left Assam, the Bura Gohaing, the senior hereditary counsellor of state, expelled the Mayamarias, "accelerated ... the death of Raja Gaurinath" and "seized on the whole authority of Government" (Description of Hindostan 1820: 746).

It seems clear that the causes of this rebellion stem from the split between Shakti and Vaishnavite Hinduism (see section 3.3). As Gait argues;

> The neo-Vaishnava sects... had now obtained remarkable dimensions. The country was full of religious preceptors and their followers who claimed exemption from the universal liability to fight and to assist in the construction of roads and tanks and other public works. (Gait 1992: 159)

Over a period of one hundred years or so, the growth of Vaishnavism resulted in Ahom kings, who had previously patronized both groups, increasingly supporting Shakti priests (e.g. Gait 1992: 158-191, Hussain 1993: 29). As the Ahom kings became weaker and more aligned to Shaktaism, so the Vaishnavites rebelled.

Ignoring the British involvement in the northeast, which will be assessed in the following chapter, and

passing over the point that it was in the British interest in the 1820's to portray Assam as an anarchic region, to justify their invasion, it is clear that this was a turbulent period. The Bura Gohaing, on achieving power, dismissed "Ghoulam Ali Beg, a Hindostany (sic) Mogul, who had been entertained by the Assam rajas to fight against the Mahamari" (East India Gazetteer 1828: 77). Ali Beg gained some form of sovereignty over sixteen villages "on the eastern bank of the Manas from which he received a large revenue, readily paid by the inhabitants for protection" (Description of Hindostan 1820: 748). He was forced into Bhutan by another "freebooter", Manick Ray, who disrupted trade and forced the local villagers to give;

> up all idea of having a fixed residence, retiring at night into the British provinces, where they kept their women and children, and re-crossing in the morning to cultivate their crops in Assam. (East India Gazetteer 1828: 77)

The "rightful" sovereign of the time, Chunder Khant, appealed to the Burmese for support in regaining his throne against the Bura Gohaing and in the early 1820's retook the throne. Attempts to remove his Burmese supporters failed and he was forced to flee to Bengal. In 1822 Menghee Maha Theluah, the commander in chief of the Burmese army, was proclaimed Raja of Assam (East India Gazetteer 1828: 78).

> Estimates of the numbers killed in this period vary.

Edward Gait quotes Gaurinath;

> In his last letter to Sir John Shore begging for the retention of the British detachment. [He] affirmed that the Moamanas had destroyed "cows, Brahmans, women and children" to the extent of one hundred thousand lives. (Gait 1992: 205)

Gait himself states;

> It is impossible to say what would have been the ultimate fate of the unhappy Assamese, had they been left unaided to the tender mercies of the Burmese. (Gait 1992: 266)

The Mayamaria revolt could well suggest that the religious harmony created by the adoption of Vaishnavism was a myth. Instead, it is used to support a call for unity, suggesting that when the Assamese work together they can repel invaders (as demonstrated by the Battle of Saraighat); when, however, the Assamese are divided, they are prone to invasion and cultural minoritization.

Indeed, throughout this period it is foreign powers who are seen to be the primary cause of the blood-shed, whether "freebooters" or the Burmese. However, this intervention could only occur because of the weaknesses of the successors to Gaurinath; Chundra Khant and Kamelshwar. Under their rule; "the feeble Ahom monarchy showed little of its earlier vitality and strength" (Rafiabadi 1988: xiv).

The contrasts between these rulers and Lachit Barphukan are clear. With strong leadership, the Assamese can solve their problems and protect their rights; without it they are doomed to division and takeover. The idea that Assam declined after the Burmese invasions suggests that previously it was in a stronger position (see section 4.1). One of the implications of the blatant use of selective myths by the Assam Movement is that there is much in the history of Assam to contradict the standard version. The discontent shown at the publication of Bose's work (see section 3.2) reflects this dichotomy.

Chapter Four

The Construction of Assamese Identity; From the British Invasion to 1947

4.0 Introduction

The British method of rule emphasized differences between groups. Real differences were consolidated, perceived differences were given greater significance and new lines of division were created. The British assumption that the control of resources, and in particular land, was the defining feature of regional hierarchy entrenched certain groups and disempowered others. The latter group, in Assam, provided the basis for the contemporary Assam Movement, which has made claims on the basis of territorial affiliation, a factor ignored by the British except in certain cases such as that of the tribal groups.

The act of classification and categorization is both a manifestation and a consolidation of power (see section 1.2). The British used the term Assam to describe the entire geographical region and, given the British method of governance, the administrative and geographical unification of the region can be dated to the onset of British rule.

Throughout the colonial period, and since Independence, the northeast has been viewed as a single entity in the perception of those from outside the region and the formation of some political and economic bodies reflects this.[1] On one level this simply recognises a

---

[1] The North East Council, for example, was founded on 1 August 1972 and was seen as necessary in the light of state reorganization to integrate development across the

truism. Geographically, there is an clear homogeneity throughout the region. Politically, particularly since Independence and the creation of East Pakistan/Bangladesh, the region has been virtually separate from the rest of India. But on other levels, culturally and linguistically, for example, there are major differences. Curiously, it is argued that the homogeneity of the region is reflected by its heterogeneity (see section 5.4).

The key themes which will be analyzed from the period of British rule are those developments which are either perpetuated to the contemporary period, through specific modes of governance, for example, or which have provided myths which are now utilized to consolidate a particular Assamese consciousness.

The similarity of government systems before and after Independence and the shorter time-span since the end of colonial rule, has resulted in many of these policies continuing to the present. The focus on language policy, for example, is important in itself but is primarily the same debate as occurred during the colonial period.

Other features are less directly but equally importantly, linked. The notion of indolence is perpetuated to the present as economic behaviour reflects and reinforces previously held colonial stereotypes.

---

region. It has established other bodies such as the North Eastern Regional Agricultural Marketing Corporation and the North Eastern Handicrafts and Handlooms Development Corporation.

The development of British rule in the northeast is important to the general argument on three counts. Firstly, the original justification for colonization, the actions of individuals and short-term necessity, was quickly changed to a portrayal of good government replacing a previously anarchic void. The dominant British historiography has created an almost unquestioned perception that pre-colonial Assamese society was anarchic.

Secondly, the manner of British rule and the British perception of the different groups in Assam, led to certain policies, particularly the use of Inner and Outer-Line regions (see section 2.4), remaining in large part unchanged until the present. The manner of colonial rule throughout India took many of the prevalent methods of rule, at first, for example, acting as Diwan of the Moghul Emperor in Bengal (Bayly 1988: 53), often co-opting merchant classes which evolved during the Moghul decline (Bayly 1988: 9-10) and later prioritising the Talukdar landowning classes (Bayly 1988: 197).

In Assam, the "native" *Pyke* system, whereby the male labouring classes, or *Pykes*, were the property of the State and were required to perform four months personal service a year, was ended as the British abolished what they perceived to be slavery. Instead, the *Pykes* were converted from serfs to free tenants on payment of three Rupees a year. This measure, coupled with the failure to pay any compensation to the Ahom ruling class, destroyed the latter's economic power (Mills 1853: 69). Thus although the India-wide elites were utilized in revenue collection within Assam, the different starting point

inevitably led to the growth of an administrative system at odds with that prevalent elsewhere in India.

Thirdly, this difference in the method of government led to certain ideas, such as Assam becoming a Crown Colony or joining with the North Burmese hill areas, being perceived as viable alternatives long after other regions had accepted the new state of India. This is linked to the geographic isolation of the northeast after Independence, as well as the territorial claims of neighbouring states over parts of the region.[2]

As with the previous chapter, it is not the intention to present historical material in an abstract sense. The claims made will be justified through reference to contemporary political events throughout.

4.1 The Causes of British Expansion

The manner of British rule in northeast India is clearly an integral part of the formation of Assamese consciousness. Sharma has argued that the;

> contradictory anti-imperialist and anti-non-Assamese aspects of Assamese nationalism were spotted by the British quite early and they naturally tried to destroy the former and encourage the latter. This resulted in the development of a strong Assamese intellectual tendency which saw the imperialists as saviours or at least as friends in the struggle against other Indians. (Sharma 1980: 1322)

British policy originally attempted to remain outside internal political relationships but, as Kaviraj

---

[2] The North East Frontier Agency/Arunachal Pradesh is claimed by China, as is Sikkim. Kokrajhar district of Assam is claimed by Bhutan. In 1995, an athlete from Arunachal Pradesh was refused a visa from China on the basis that he was already Chinese. In 1997, the same occurred for the Chief Minister of the state.

argues, given enlightenment rationality, over time, policies attempted "to introduce the logic of modernity" (Kaviraj 1991: 78) into previously unenumerated societies. Reactions to this varied between acceptance or resistance, the latter sometimes based upon "pre-existing structural forms" or else through new forms of collective action.

The immediate causes of the expansion are relevant in the sense that the British perception of the situation in Assam on their arrival affected their subsequent manner of rule.

The 1820 *Description of Hindostan* demonstrates the growing links of the British with the region before formal colonization. Along with the military involvement, there were economic ties;

> Many years ago the Bengal government, in consequence of orders from Europe, established a salt agent at Goalpara to monopolize the Assam salt trade, but after several years trial, the loss sustained was so great that the Marquis Cornwallis, who always abhorred petty traffic, ordered it to be suppressed. Mr Daniel Raush, a respectable Hanoverian, succeeded as the principal merchant, but soon found himself creditor to the Raja, Bura Gohaing, and to many other chiefs, who had the address to get possession of his property, in spite of his caution and long experience of their bad faith. In 1796 he quitted his factory at Goalpara, entered Assam and proceeded towards the capital, to endeavour to effect some compromise for his claims amounting to three lacks (sic) of Rupees; but on the route he was treacherously assassinated by the Raja of Dring's (or Dorong) followers, and had his pinnaces pillaged and his papers destroyed. In 1801, the Marquis Wellesley, compassionating (sic) the distress of his widow and destitute family, dispatched Comul Lochun Nundy, a native agent, to the court of Assam, to recover the arrears; in furtherance of which object he furnished himself with letters to the Raja and

> prime minister, explanatory of his mission, and reminding them, that they were wholly indebted for the re-establishment of their authority to the British succours under Captain Welsh in 1793. (Description of Hindostan 1820: 746-747)

Nundy returned after two years with 10,000 Rupees "recovered" from a custom-house agent. He reported however that;

> ...the general anarchy, the injustice exercised, and the horrid cruelties perpetuated by whoever has the power, excites surprise that all the lower classes who have the means do not migrate to the British territories, which are close at hand and contain immense tracts of waste land. (Description of Hindostan 1820: 747)

The report concludes that;

> Assam in its present condition is so utterly destitute of any thing to attract an invasion, that its invasion by the Chinese and Gorkhas of Nepaul (sic) may almost appear an extravagance; yet in the year 1815 two agents were despatched on the part of the Nepaul government to the court of Assam, which they quitted after sojourning some time, and returned to their own country, either through the northern part of Bootan, or the southern tract of the Grand Lama's territories. (Description of Hindostan 1820: 749)

Yet within two years the Burmese army had invaded, as the mercenaries which the Ahom rulers had attempted to utilize against the Mayamarias, instead turned against them. As the 1828 *East India Gazetteer* relates;

> Now began the never-failing aggressions that invariably take place when a prosperous native power comes in contact with the boundaries of the British dominions, which at last terminated in a rupture about the muddy island of Shapuree, on the coast of Chittagong. A British detachment under Colonel Richards then entered Assam, and in the course of 1825, expelled the Burmese usurpers and obtained completed possession of the country, which must henceforward be virtually considered and integral portion of the British empire in India. Indeed

without population and with an unknown frontier, this phantom of a kingdom could not for a year exist on its own resources, it must consequently be supported by its conquerors; a civil and military establishment appointed; a fleet of boats on the Brahmaputra, and many other expensive drains created on the Bengal treasury; *such is the uncontrollable progress of events in India*. (East India Gazetteer 1828: 78)(my italics)

The causes of British expansion then seem clear. Firstly, the economic motive was apparent, witnessed not only through the salt trade but, as the Gazetteer suggests, a belief that; "while Hindostan was under the Mogul emperors, the trade with Assam was a source of considerable national profit".

Secondly, and most immediately, following the Burmese invasion, continuing raids from Assam into the British territory required a British response, the First Burmese War, the timing of which resulted in large part from the defeat of Napoleon and the Marathas, freeing the Indian Army for the northeast frontier (Burns 1973: 1-14).

Thirdly, the personalities involved enabled Assam to remain on the colonial agenda. Raush was clearly influential given that Marquis Wellesley sent an expedition into Assam on the apparent basis of the destitution of his widow. Most of Britain's earlier involvement with, and knowledge of, Assam had come from attempts to recover the debts to Raush.

Fourthly, Assam was seen as anarchic and the British would seem justified in making this claim. However, by 1858, the Gazetteer changed the emphasis of justification for involvement in the northeast, making no mention of

Raush, merely stating that, after Captain Welsh and his detachment left Assam in 1793;

> From this period Assam seems to have been abandoned into anarchy... Under British rule there can be no doubt that the arts of civilization will gradually extend. (Gazetteer of the East India Company 1858: 46)

That the British would choose to emphasize the introduction of good government as a cause of expansion is a wide-spread phenomenon;

> The "white man's burden" was to civilize the world. The British were the torch bearers... Not only did these countries [colonies] have to safeguard the right of Europeans to define the meaning of civilisation - which actually guaranteed their preeminence - but the protection of this right became, in addition, the moral raison d'etre of the conquerors. (Ferro 1997: 21)

This desire to justify moral superiority, particularly in the mid to late nineteenth century, might well be seen to colour visions of what went before. In the case of Assam this would not seem to be the situation but the over-riding emphasis on the negative aspects of pre-British rule might appear to require further elucidation, particularly given that this period is used as a metaphor for an Assamese fear of annihilation. The disappearance of Raush from the later Gazetteers provides a confirmation of a widespread aversion to adventurers throughout subsequent British imperial expansion. It was preferable to predicate expansion on the basis of Imperial destiny rather than individual whim, despite the latter having provided the origin of most of the British Empire.

The justification of British rule is a subject in itself, and is only important to this thesis in as much

as it imposed a lasting discourse on the Assamese. In the terms of this work Assam's colonization has given hegemony to a number of ideas which have subsequently been represented and passed down through generations and have affected forms of governance, based upon initial British impressions of the "type" of people they had conquered. It is interesting to hypothecate the possibility that Assam could have become a princely state. The British attempted to impose tributaries on the throne of Assam but, due to an inability both to meet the financial burden, the scale of which, questions the British intent to enable Assam to remain separate (see section 4.3), and the need to maintain internal order in such a strategically important region, led to direct British rule.

4.2 British Economic Policy:

New Immigrants and the Indolent Assamese

That British colonialism was generically justified through differing and, at times, contradictory, motives is well-documented. On the one hand, notions of good government, discussed in the previous section, suggested that it was Britain's moral responsibility to guide "lesser" peoples towards the principles prevalent in nineteenth century Britain.

On the other hand, there were more pressing short-term needs for the new rulers. Despite an overt emphasis on the moral aspects of rule, there was a need to make colonies economically productive such that, rather than being a drain on the British state's resources, they could profit the metropolis (Roberts 1990: 26). This required the introduction of new economic conditions on

the colonized and removed that agency necessary for the fulfilment of any form of self-rule.

That the British were aware of the trading opportunities of Assam is undoubted, particularly given the role of Raush in early British expansion. Yet in the 1820's it seems clear that profit was not instantly achievable and that it was at all owed more to historical accident than any advanced planning. Indeed, as was often the case, territory was initially conquered due to the actions of individuals and simultaneously justified through notions of good government. Later, as Parliament and the Exchequer in Britain became more opposed to paying money to the colonies, expansion was justified through economic motives which were even further away from the original cause of expansion than were notions of "good government".

The severance of Japanese trade with European states in the early nineteenth century (Griffiths 1967: 37), coupled with the fear that China would do likewise, led to a fear that tea would disappear from the markets of Europe. Observations of tea-drinking amongst the Assamese tribes in 1815 and the discovery of a tea plant in Katmandu in 1816 (Griffiths 1967: 35), eventually led to the establishment of a Tea Committee in Calcutta, consisting of;

> seven servants of the East India Company, three Calcutta merchants, Wallich [a botanist working of the East India Company] and two Indian gentlemen. (Griffiths 1967: 39)

A memorandum was sent to local officials of the Company, and Captain Jenkins, from 1834 the Governor-

General to the Northeast Frontier, reported that tea was indeed indigenous to Assam.[3]

Within four years tea was sent to London but tea production required two necessary inputs. The first, tea-plants, came from China. The second, tea planters and pickers proved more difficult. The British, apparently convinced of the Chinese propensity for tea manufacture, originally shipped Chinese labourers from Singapore but, after an altercation in Calcutta in which sixty Chinese were jailed by the Magistrate (Griffiths 1967: 64), new sources of labour were sought.

Until 1859, most of the labour used was local, primarily Kachari tribals. However, the ability of local people to strike and *gherao* the planters led to the use of poorly-paid indentured labour (Guha 1988: 14).

In many senses much, if not most, of the present problems in Assam flow directly from decisions made at this time. The perceived indolence of the Assamese required labour to be transported to Assam from elsewhere in British India. The tea labourers were brought in from what is now Bihar and Uttar Pradesh and the plantations themselves were run by British and other European entrepreneurs. At a stroke the economic power of the indigenous Assamese was removed and they were, in large part, irrelevant to the main industry of the northeast. Those high caste Assamese who did start their own plantations, or worked as managers on the estates,

---

[3] The full story of the "discovery" of tea in Assam by the British does not need to be made here. Chapter Four of *the History of the Indian Tea Industry* by Sir Percival Griffiths (1967) comprehensively describes the process.

suffered from discrimination by British planters (Hussain 1993: 44).

This important characteristic of Assamese indolence was explained by the British in four differing, and indeed contradictory, approaches. The first method was to argue that the Assamese were simply a lazy people and for some this was clearly perceived to be an inherent racial trait, requiring no justification;

> An extent of 300 by 300 will cost from 200 to 300 Rupees; i.e. according to the manner in which the miserable Opium-smoking Assamese work. This alone ought to point out the utility of introducing a superior race of labourers, who would not only work themselves, but encourage their women and children to do the same... This I have not been able to instil into the heads of the Assamese, who will not permit their women to come into the Tea gardens. (Bruce, Quoted in Griffiths 1967: 55)

> ...Naholia is and always has been very short of labour: a good deal of dependence has always been placed upon a large Assamese village close at hand, whence labour might be drawn to work the whole garden three times over, but the men will not work, finding it more profitable to sit at home and rear fowls and ducks for our Coolies... Elephant traps have also drawn away a considerable number of hands from this village; it suits the lazy habits of the Assamese to sit by a trap the live-long dauy (sic), doing nothing but eating pan and opium, which is supplied by the owner of the trap gratuitously, together with a few annas money, and there is the prospect of a large share of the proceeds when the herd has been captured, which, however, does not happen very often. (Report of the Directors of the Northern Assam Tea Company 1867: 60)

> The Assamese are lazy and likely to be ousted by more pushing but less attractive Bengali Muslims. (Wavell 1973: 41)

The Assamese use of opium was regarded as the primary cause of their reluctance to work and affected

the manner of British rule since revenue from opium went directly to the government. The use of opium in Assam apparently originated from a gift from the Moghul kings in the seventeenth century before which its usage was uncertain,[4] but;

> ...the custom, if it existed at all, was certainly confined to the Royal Court and the nobles. That the Royal Court indulged in it at the end of the eighteenth century can be gathered conclusively from the Report of Captain Welsh in 1792 to Lord Cornwallis. He describes the King, Gaurinath Singha, as "a poor debilitated man, incapable of transacting business, always either washing or praying; and whenever seen intoxicated with opium." (Assam Congress Opium Enquiry Report 1925: 17-18)

Furthermore, during the early period of British rule, the Assam Congress claimed that; "their one care was to introduce their own opium for revenue purposes in order to undersell the indigenous product" (Assam Congress Report 1925: 19).

British criticism of the Non-Co-operation Movement of the 1920's on the grounds that its object was not "temperance but simply the embarrassment of the government" (Assam Congress Report: 29) were incorrect, according to the Congress Party since;

> ...the object of the Non-Co-operators was not aimed at its revenue directly; it was a movement of genuine temperance reform among the people... the resultant effort of their efforts was indeed to reduce Government revenue and indirectly to embarrass the Government; but the Government is to blame for entangling itself so much with excise revenue. (Assam Congress Report 1925: 29)

---

[4] Ignoring historical evidence, a P.L.P. (see section 5.5) memorandum of 1978 claimed that "the British introduced opium and hemp to devitalise the population" (Quoted in Trivedi 1987: 598).

That said, it was claimed that;

> In places, Non-Cooperation workers encouraged illegal poppy cultivation, telling the cultivators that swaraj would mean the end of restrictions on domestic opium production. (Report on the Administration of the Excise Department 1922/23: 7)

But even in the 1850's British officials justified the undercutting of indigenous opium with cheaper imported opium from Bihar sold by the Collectors not for revenue purposes but for the good of the Assamese;

> With some portion of the present generation, kanee [opium] is really a necessary of life; they positively could not exist without it, and I am perfectly sure that no checks that could be devised would ever cure them of taking it in large quantities. Stopping the cultivation [through taxation] will be of use chiefly to the next generation, and partly to such of the present as have not yet learnt to use if intemperately. I perfectly agree with the local authorities in thinking, that aiding in the cultivation and preparation of kanee gives the Assamese a relish for it, and that the practice of itself has created a large number of kaneeahs, or confirmed opium-eaters. (Mills 1853: 75)

The most important influence of the use of opium lay in the attractiveness of using immigrants to work in Assam and made the granting of generous allowances for immigrants much more acceptable. Despite the economic influences in governance, those British officers and administrators who were keenest on immigration for increasing tea production for revenue purposes, such as C.A. Bruce, were generally the more disapproving of the intemperance of the Assamese, and were those who were unconcerned about the possible extinction of the Assamese language and culture (see also section 4.4). The

underlying theme to both attitudes was clearly based on the ability to raise revenue;

> Opium was the most important source of revenue in colonial Assam... It was a gold mine... The Government opium policy was of maximising the revenue through a system of monopoly pricing. (A. Guha 1988: 55)

The moral issue regarding the use of opium to extract taxation was less of a problem to those who regarded opium-taking as an inherent trait, unchangeable in the short-term at least.

The second method of explaining the need for immigrant labour was to argue that there actually very few, indigenous Assamese, due to the preceding "anarchy". As such, in this interpretation, there was no problem to be solved;

> Assam, before it came under British protection had been almost entirely depopulated by internal discord and Burmese invasion. The population of a country in such circumstances is but slowly renewed. (Assam Company's Report 1841, quoted in Griffiths 1967: 64)

Jenkins, writing in 1833 argued that Assam, before the Burmese invasions;

> ...supported a very dense population on the whole happily governed. The wealth of its princes appear to have subjected the inhabitants to faction, dissensions and foreign invasions and ended in reducing a flourishing and populous state to the utmost degree of wretchedness and degeneracy. (Quoted in Lahiri 1994: 272)

Not only does this suggest that the population of Assam was decimated but this provides external support for the resurrection of a golden period in history, prior to the Burmese invasion, able to be utilized in the contemporary period.

Major Vetch, Deputy Commissioner of Assam and Commissioner of Revenue in the 1850's, was clearer than most that the main purpose of British rule was to collect revenue, rather than instil good government. He argued for "a regular line of steamers" to be used to import coolies from Bengal, and that;

> In a country so abounding with waste land as Assam, and with so scanty a population, Government may well part with a portion, on any terms, if thereby settlers be induced to come into the country, trusting to the general advantage to be gained by the impetus to trade and agriculture from planting factories in different parts of the Province. (Mills 1853: 72)

Vetch believed that the changes introduced to the revenue system in Assam (see section 4.0) were at fault in encouraging "an indolent contentment [rather] than act[ing] as a stimulus to further exertion" (Mills 1853: 69). Vetch also suggested a rent free period of thirty or fifty years since the requirements of tea labourers would ensure that waste land would be used profitably (Mills 1853: 74). Vetch then attributes indolence to the taxation system, rather than to any inherent trait, and suggests that through the imposition of incentives productivity would be encouraged. His ideas regarding general taxation and rent were derived from those rules for establishing tea plantations which;

> ... were issued in 1838, when it was laid down that any tract of waste land, from 100 to 10,000 acres, might be taken up on a forty-five years' lease, with a rent-free period of from five to twenty years... and, after that, a progressive assessment on three-quarters of the area rising to 1-2 Rupees an acre. (Gait 1992: 340)

Thirdly, and perhaps most controversially in as much as it was used at varying times to explain the behaviour

of (nearly) all communities in India, was the commonplace British perception that effeminate Hinduism had sapped the strength of the Assamese.[5] As Inden has argued, the portrayal of Hinduism as emotional, irrational and feminine, and thereby in opposition to "Western, male rationality", removed human agency and the ability to act rationally from Indian subjects (Inden 1992: 87). In some senses the British did not need to understand the differing situations of Indians. Through their training and experience they knew instinctively how the Indians acted and why this was so, even as the contradiction between the "difference" of India they assumed, and similarities they witnessed became almost untenable as British rule progressed (Metcalf 1997). As the *Description of Hindostan* argued;

> Hitherto the Assamese had been a warlike and enterprising people, and their princes worthy of the government; but after their conversion by the Brahmins the nation sunk into the most abject pusillanimity towards foreigners, and into internal turbulence and confusion. (Description of Hindostan 1820: 745)

Fourthly, it was argued that the Assamese and Bengalis were two of the many intrinsically opposed groups out of which India was comprised and as such were incapable of working with each other;

> There was abundance of local labour, and with proper tact I don"t think any imported labour would have been required; but some few Bengalees were got in the first instance, and... the local labour, too, which used to be abundant has also been scared away by the Bengalees. (Report of the Directors of the Northern Assam Tea Company 1867: 39)

---

[5] Edward Gait explained the same process, in relation to the Ahoms (see section 3.2).

> As a rule I object to Assamese being in charge of gardens where Bengali coolies are employed, as there may be some disturbance. (Report of the Directors of the Northern Assam Tea Company 1867: 45)

The growth of the portrayal of individuals as members of intrinsically opposed races throughout this period owes much to anthropological studies emphasising difference between groups and cultural similarity within (see section 1.1). The effect of this, particularly towards the latter half of the nineteenth century, was to imply a level of causality to events where racial tensions were absent. Thus, if a Bengali "coolie" and an Assamese manager caused a "disturbance", this merely demonstrated the underlying tension between the races, rather than suggesting that there was some fault in labour practices or another strategic issue.

The British attributed Assamese indolence to the features summarized above. At this stage it is worth outlining the present-day Assamese response to claims of indolence. The first point is that the Assamese were economically better off continuing to work on their highly productive and scarcely inhabited land than they would have been moving to tea plantations. Simple economic rationality, rather than sloth, was the primary cause of their decision to remain outside the plantation economy (for example, Das 1982: 23). Indeed, some of the more sympathetic British officials agreed. Jenkins, for example, admitted that;

> The Assamese had very few wants: they lived principally upon rice, and were clothed in their own silks and cotton, and none of them had ever been traders, nor are they now,nor had they any other than domestic manufactures. (Mills 1853: 59)

Gait simply attributed the need for immigrants to the fact that;

> There are very few landless labourers in Assam and people who have land naturally prefer the independence and ease of their position as cultivators to the discipline and labour of the tea gardens. (Gait 1992: 340-341)

Secondly, there is a claim that the British actually preferred to use indentured labour, rather than local people, due to the ease with which they could be controlled.[6] Certainly, it is argued, once the initial decision had been made to use such labourers, they proved easier to exploit than the indigenous Assamese.

The use of opium was regarded by Assamese elites themselves as an explanation of the backwardness of their community. In 1919, a member of the Assam Legislative Council, Phani Dhar Chaliha, argued that; "if the opium trade is retained, the Assamese race will be almost extinct within about two hundred years hence" (Quoted in A. Guha 1988: 90).

There is another argument, prevalent in some Assamese quarters which suggests a different cause of this problem. Rather than disagreeing with the British notion, the wide-spread use of opium is suggested to have affected the genetic make-up of the Assamese, such that the whole population is permanently drugged. Rumours exist within Assam of a medical report, which none of my interviewees could pinpoint, suggesting that this would

---

[6] "Labour," wrote the late Sir Herbert Risley... "is the birthright of the pure Dravidian and as a coolie he is in great demand wherever one meets him. Whether hoeing tea in Assam..." (Holderness 1928: 70)

take seven generations to fade away, explaining the recent revival of Assamese nationalism. Medically, this concept has no substance, but its discussion raises the importance of perception, rather than truth, and the desire to exonerate ancestors for "allowing" the immigration to occur.

That the notion of Assamese laziness developed from certain attitudes held by the British of the time is clear, but that it remains in popular perception, and even appears in some academic texts, is perhaps more surprising.[7] The chapter regarding Assam in *State Politics in India* (Narain 1976), ascribes the massive growth in population to;

> ... immigration from Pakistan, Nepal and other states in India in search of a livelihood which is relatively easier to get here particularly because of the medieval aversion of the local people towards certain jobs, especially of manual nature. In fact, almost the entire labour force in the state comes from outside. (Deka 1976: 30)

It is essential to understand the importance of this concept for an understanding of the rise of the Assam Movement in the contemporary period. Not only did the idea that the Assamese were indolent lead to the encouragement of immigration but this impression has remained, leading to non-Assamese businessmen arguing that they prefer to employ other non-Assamese, not

---

[7] Although, as post-modern approaches increase in salience, perhaps less so;

> Categories continue to exist long after their foundations have been knocked away as a result of their reproduction in political and cultural discourse. (McAll 1990: 38)

because of cultural support networks, but simply because they feel the Assamese to be incapable of working hard. An idea that the British at least attempted to justify, has passed into non-Assamese perceptions of the Assamese as a "fact". Given that many of the root causes of the Assam Movement can be ascribed to perceived economic backwardness, both state-wide, but more importantly, relative to other groups within the state, the impression that the local people are work-shy is a major contributory factor to the rise of Assamese chauvinism.

This has not only affected the image of the Assamese in paid employment. Even when their homes are at risk from flooding, in the post-Independence period, it has been suggested that the Assamese lack the motivation to protect themselves. Nag reports that;

> The legendary Assamese laziness has shown up year after year as the Brahmaputra floods strike the valley. It is common practice for the relief agencies to employ flood-hit people as daily wage-labourers to build bandhs, etc. Officials have frequently recorded instances of the Assamese hiring Mians for the job for as little as half the wage... (Nag 1990: 119)

Again, this could be explained through simple economic rationality but rather it is assumed to demonstrate the correctness of the colonial stereotype. As with the preference for indentured immigrant tea-plantation workers, many Assamese suggest that the major cause of this is less due to their unsuitability to work but more due to the availability and ease of using cheap Bangladesh labour. The continuing ability of businessmen to employ cheap unskilled Bangladeshi labourers, often through middlemen, particularly for construction projects, has led to artificially low wages in the

northeast and especially in major cities such as Guwahati, adding to hostility towards immigrants. The importance to the Assam Movement of building greater defences against illegal immigration stems from this as much as the desire for a tangible symbol. It is commonly believed, although obviously no reliable figures exist, that half of all rickshaw pullers, and two-thirds of construction workers in Guwahati are recent (illegal) immigrants from Bangladesh.

The British introduction of immigrant tea-plantation workers is important as it not only added to the perception that Assam was a region to which hard-working migrants could move, setting the path for the later Bengali Muslim migration, but in the manner of their cultural assimilation. Like earlier immigrants (see section 3.4) these tea-plantation workers gave up their migrant cultures and adopted both the Assamese language and culture, celebrating Bihu festivals, for example (Weiner 1978: 90). This occurred despite the spatial separation of tea plantation workers from the Assamese, the tea plantations being physically isolated from mainstream society.

This contrasts vividly with the perception of later Bengali Muslim immigrants who were seen to transfer their entire communities into Assam and maintain their earlier cultural artifacts.[8] The Bengali Muslims are also much more noticeable than the tea plantation workers, often living in the same villages as the Assamese.

---

[8] A common contemporary complaint is that they "point their television aerials towards Bangladesh".

> Pakistani flags were flown in Assam in 1962 when China invaded India. Bangladesh flags and portraits of Mujibur Rahman were displayed with "Joy Bangla" slogans on March 26, 1980, at Howley, Barpeta in a demonstration by the infiltrators. (A.K. Das 1982: 3-4)

Generally, these Muslims were small-scale peasant farmers, constrained by the Line System from settling throughout the northeast, instead concentrating themselves in certain areas in the Brahmaputra Valley, Cachar and Sylhet. However, as the 1882-83 Assam Trade Report notes, describing trade to and from Manipur, in a manner noteworthy for its description of the Angami Nagas;

> By far the larger numbers of traders which enter the valley are Bengalis from the district of Cachar and Sylhet, and the bulk of these are Mohammedans... A larger number than usual of Angamis from the Naga Hills district have traded to and from this year and have told me, in reply to my question that their present occupation is a far pleasanter and more palatable one than being constantly on the war path and cutting off one another's heads. (Assam Trade Report 1883: 12-13)

A defining moment of Bengali Muslim immigration came during the Chief Ministership of Saadulla (see section 4.3). Fears that Assam was being swamped by Muslims for communal purposes led Jawaharlal Nehru and Rajendra Prasad to express concern about the influx in the 1930's, and Prasad;

> ... even wanted to balance the [immigration] by sending large numbers of Hindus from Bihar. In November 1937, two leading Assamese intellectuals of the day, Ambikagiri Roy Choudhury and Nilmoni Phukan, had met Jawaharlal Nehru with a formal representation which stated that the Congress would get the whole hearted support of the Assamese people only if it backed effective steps to fight the influx from Bengal. (E.P.W. 8 December 1979: 1993)

Whereas the Bengali Muslim immigrants were generally poor but a numerical threat to the Assamese, Bengali Hindu and Marwari immigrants were numerically small but conspicuous both for the economic superiority and their maintenance of separate institutions. Marwari trading communities started entering Assam as soon as it was opened up by the British. Marwari migration to take over the commerce of the northeast was accompanied by immigration of Bengali Hindu *bhadraloks* (gentlefolk) who moved into administrative positions (see section 4.4).

This increased from the 1920's onwards as it became clearer that east Bengal was to be separated from west Bengal. An exodus of Bengali Hindus left the east to move to neighbouring regions, particularly western Bengal and Assam. Although the majority stayed until partition, even prior to Independence, the growing Bengali Hindu preponderance in urban areas was becoming more marked.

4.3 Political Reorganization

The political changes instigated by the British derived at times from changes in language policy, from economic rationalization and from a number of different strategic or attitudinal factors, particularly with reference to the tribal groups. Through focusing specifically on the changes and their causes, this section will elucidate some generic trends in British policy in the northeast. These trends have, in large part, continued after Independence and thus have helped create the environment in which the contemporary Assam Movement has flourished.

Once the Treaty of Yandabo had been concluded in 1826, the British announced that, although Assam was technically theirs by right of conquest, they did not

believe that immediate annexation was necessary. David Scott, the political agent of the East India Company appointed during the Burmese War, suggested that the Company should take over western Assam, whilst the east could be ruled by an Ahom King as a protectorate (Lahiri 1994: 34).

This latter move was delayed under the pretext of an inability to find a suitable ruler. Rebellions in 1828, and again in 1830, led to the East India Company acceding to Scott's request, though its implementation was delayed until 1833. Purandar Singh, the chosen ruler, was forced to pay a massive tribute to the Company of 50,000 Rupees, half of his annual revenue. By 1839, Singh was deposed because of an ability to pay and due to alleged "maladministration". Assam was subsequently incorporated into the Bengal Presidency (Gait 1992: 292-293).

Political developments from 1837 to 1871 focused on the issue of language[9] which became the unifying symbol of the Assamese. Bengali was made the language of schools and the courts in 1837 and Assamese was only recognized as distinct from Bengali in 1871. The subsequent fracturing of Assam from the rest of the Calcutta Presidency, in 1874, was basically due to administrative rationalization and Assam became a Chief Commissioner's Province. In 1905, Sir Andrew Fraser's plan to partition

---

[9] The Indian Mutiny/First War of Independence scarcely affected Assam. Maniram Dewan, Chief Minister of the last Ahom king, was executed for treason after soliciting Hindu soldiers stationed in Dibrugarh to rebel (Gait 1992: 310-322). Due to his anti-imperialist message, he has latterly been portrayed as one of the first Assamese nationalists (A. Guha 1988: 19).

Bengal was implemented. The Chief Commissioner of Assam's response to Fraser's initial suggestion of the amalgamation of Assam and east Bengal was that four new Commissionerships could be created at the reorganization;

> The effect of this would be to give the new province five Commissionerships, and pro tanto to enhance its attractions as far as the prospects of promotion are concerned. (Reconstitution of the Provinces 1906: 9)

The importance of this was reiterated during a discussion regarding the proposed creation of a new Chief Commissionership of Behar (sic);

> The proposed Commission would not be large enough to recruit for itself, and would therefore have to borrow officers as Assam does now. If it were attached for recruiting purposes to the United Provinces, as considerations of language would seem to suggest, it is probable that officers of those provinces would be nearly as unwilling to serve in the new province as Bengal officers now are to go to Assam. (Reconstitution of the Provinces 1906: 12)

Throughout the discussion of advantages and disadvantages of this new division, the main justification given was to aid Assamese development through joining it to more advanced eastern Bengal. Most of the complaints against the move came from Bengalis, either businessmen such as Siddarth Roy with interests in both halves of Bengal, or from those in eastern Bengal who felt that they would be dragged down by backward Assam. The Report claims;

> Among some with whom the Lieutenant Governor first discussed the matter, there was no doubt a feeling that Assam was more or less a land of Rakshas, hobgoblins and various terrors; and the strange similes used in describing the transfer to Assam would be really incredible to one who had not heard them. (Reconstitution of the Provinces 1906: 64)

The new state; the "North-Eastern Provinces", i.e. eastern Bengal and Assam, comprised eighteen million Muslims and twelve million Hindus and was further seen as a counterpoise to Bengali nationalism. As Curzon argued;

> Bengal united is a power. Bengal divided will pull several different ways. That is what the Congress leaders feel; their apprehensions are perfectly correct and they form one of the great merits of the scheme... one of our main objects is to split up and thereby weaken a solid body of opponents to our rule. (quoted in Penderel Moon 1989: 934)

Saroda Charan Mitter, a Calcutta High Court judge, claimed that "high caste Hindus will dominate Eastern Bengal fifty years, aye, a century hence" (Limaye 1987: 307). However, it was clear that in a democratic framework that the British had encouraged to act along sectarian lines, the Muslims would eventually take control.

In 1912, the partition of Bengal was annulled due to Bengali protests (A. Guha 1988: 81) and Assam was reestablished as a separate Chief Commissioner's province. This remained until the Government of India Act, 1919, under which Assam became a Governor's Province. At Independence the predominantly Bengali Muslim district of Sylhet opted to join East Pakistan, after a referendum, although the largely Bengali Hindu province of Cachar remained in Assam.

The main issue of note in this section is that the indigenous Assamese had virtually no control of the political changes imposed on them. Although this may seem self-evident in a colony, it contrasts vividly with the position of neighbouring Bengal. Whereas political changes regarding Bengal were made in response, either

reactive or proactive, to events in Bengal, reorganization occurred in Assam not because of events in Assam or demands from Assamese elites but rather in response to events in Bengal.

Consequently, the importance of these machinations is that two ideas have been used, with considerable effect, to affect popular perceptions of governance, and in particular Assam's relationship to the centre. The first is that Assam is somehow a pawn used in other political debates. The merger of eastern Bengal and Assam was clearly politically motivated. The earlier division of Assam and the Inner and Outer-Line policies, all instigated for administrative convenience or in response to non-Assamese demands, are seen to have overlooked any wishes of the Assamese themselves. This idea recurred during the state reorganization of the 1970's (see section 5.2).

The second idea, following from the first, is that the Assamese have only achieved their aspirations, however these are defined, through protest. Whether recognition of language (see section 4.4), statehood or later events, without protest none of these political demands would have been achieved. The building of the second bridge over the Brahmaputra at Saraighat, Guwahati in 1987 is an oft-quoted recent example used to demonstrate that this feeling still holds true (e.g. Hussain 1993: 78). Before this bridge was built, there was only one bridge in an 800 kilometre stretch of the Brahmaputra. The idea of neglect is discussed elsewhere (see section 5.4) and is closely linked to the need for protest to achieve political demands.

The outcome of the Government of India Act, 1935 provided one further tool to be used by contemporary Assamese nationalists. In April, Mohammed Saadulla, whose party, the Assam Union Muslim League gained seven seats, became Chief Minister. He headed a coalition Government opposed by the Congress Party which held 35 out of 108 seats in the State Assembly. Saadulla was supported by a disparate group including the tea planters. Various smaller Muslim parties, including the Surma Valley Independent Group[10] and the United Muslim Party generally sided with the Congress Party, and Saadulla resigned on 4 August 1938, forming a new, predominantly Muslim League, Ministry the following day. Although forced out by September 1938, Saadulla had effectively packed local boards with his own supporters (A. Guha 1988: 227).

Saadulla's support eventually crumbled and Gopinath Bardoloi formed the first Assamese Congress Ministry. This resigned in 1939 as the Congress Working Committee demanded withdrawal over the declaration of war. Subhas Chandra Bose argued that Assam was a special case and the Congress government should have continued. Gandhi later admitted that he was wrong in opposing this (Hazarika 1985: 56).[11] The second Saadulla Ministry saw a conscious attempt to encourage Muslim immigration. This was recognized as an attempt to ensure that Assam became part

---

[10] The price of whose eventual support was, according to Sir Robert Reid, Governor of Assam, a ministership (Hazarika 1995: 52).

[11] The treatment of Assam as a special region by Congress leaders before Independence can only have reinforced the idea that the Assamese were somehow different from mainstream Indian society.

of the Muslim group of states and throughout the 1930's and 1940's Bengali Muslim control of agricultural land increased.[12]

Saadulla is still a reviled figure to Assamese nationalists, particularly in contrast to his Congress opponent, Gopinath Bardoloi,[13] under whose leadership the caste Hindu Assamese elite had a freedom to wield power unmatched until 1985 (Hazarika 1995: 151).

The Line System, introduced in the 1920's, had been aimed primarily at preventing Bengali Muslim migration into tribal areas, but the effect of this was to act as a diversion from the hills into the plains. That the Bengali Muslims adopted the Assamese language was generally perceived to be an attempt to ensure Assam joined the Islamic grouping, whilst immigrants sacrificed the least costly part of a Bengali identity, particularly given the similarities between the two languages.[14]

As Independence grew closer, a great many ideas were floated throughout British India, and the idea that Assam

---

[12] A further cause of the growth of immigration was the increased ability for it to occur, both due to the reduction in disease and the improvement of communications. J. McSwinney, Superintendent of Census Operation, wrote that the extension of the railway to Guwahati was likely to encourage more immigration (Limaye 1987: 308).

[13] Bardoloi's son was kidnapped in 1993 by the Bodo Security Force.

[14] The extent to which Bengali Muslims have adopted the Assamese language is debated (see section 5.1). As Gupta argues; "most Bengalis have never accepted that Assamese is a fully-fledged language in itself" (Gupta 1984: 129).

was to remain a Crown Colony after Independence has remained strong, despite this viewpoint being supported only by a few British officers and opposed by the British authorities (Sema 1986: 81). Sreejut Rohini Kumar Choudhuri raised questions in the Legislative Assembly regarding the possibility of the hill districts of Assam forming a new province combined with the trans-frontier hills and parts of north Burma, and warned Edward Benthall[15] that;

> ... the idea of separation of the areas from Assam and their amalgamation with the trans-frontier hills and Northern Burma... is repugnant to the people of Assam living in the plains and hills? (Legislative Assembly Debates 1946: 1212)

Benthall, in his reply, stated that;

> The attention of the Government of India has been drawn to certain allegations that schemes are under consideration for the separation of the Assam hill areas from India and their constitution as a separate Colony or State. There is no truth in these allegations and no such scheme is being considered. (Legislative Assembly Debates 1946: 1212)

Despite these denials, the idea has remained in Assamese consciousness that the British did prefer a different option for Assam than independence within India, allowing for the feasibility of contemporary Assamese independence to appear greater and, more importantly, to emphasize difference from the mainstream Indian polity.

In 1946, the Cabinet Mission Plan included Assam in Group C, meaning it would be joined, again, to Bengal in

---

[15] War Transport Member of the Governor-General's Executive Council.

the projected Provincial Assembly. According to Wavell, Nehru;

> ... passed over the joining of Assam to Bengal without much comment, accepting the reason that geographical reasons made it necessary. (Wavell 1973: 271)

After the Indian National Congress won an absolute majority in the post-war elections, Vallabhbhai Patel warned Wavell that; "he had no great fears about Section "B", but it was different in Section "C" where Assam might be overwhelmed" (Wavell 1973: 347).

As partition became inevitable, the Cabinet Mission Plan was abandoned and, under the subsequent Mountbatten Partition Plan, a referendum was to be held in Bengali-dominated Sylhet, which acceded to East Pakistan. This increased the ratio of Assamese-speakers vis-a-vis Bengalis, although it led to an influx of Bengali Hindus from Sylhet, particularly to the neighbouring "twin" district of Cachar.

With the majority of Bengali Muslims, particularly at elite level, leaving Assam for East Pakistan at Independence, the Other, which under Saadulla's Ministry had clearly been Bengali Muslims, was reconstructed as Bengali Hindus, at least for the early years after Independence. What is important for the argument regarding the contemporary construction of the Assamese community is that myths regarding Muslim acceptance or rejection are both available and different voices within the Assam Movement have articulated both themes to justify personal visions of Assamese society.

Saadulla's attempts to increase Bengali Muslim immigration with the aim of joining Assam to a future

Pakistan failed but it was more the interest of national level Congress leaders which prevented this from occurring, rather than Assamese protest. Bardoloi, for example, was not a powerful enough figure to oppose the demands for his resignation in 1939 which allowed Saadulla to return to power.

4.4 Language Policy

Fear of Assamese cultural genocide has, since 1837 when Bengali replaced Assamese as the language of schools and courts, manifested itself most markedly in attitudes towards official language policy. This is not to say that the Assamese language is the most important feature of an Assamese identity, then or now. This is shown by attitudes towards Bengali Muslims, who have at times been accepted for their use of the Assamese language and at other times opposed. Rather, it is generally through language that opposition to immigrants has been expressed.

One possible explanation of the focus on linguistic affiliation is the role of the British census. This was the only accurate method by which the extent of immigration could be assessed, as Assamese language speakers could be quantified. Thus although protests have focused on language, it seems hazardous to give paramountcy to language as the major feature of Assamese culture since linguistic data was the only method by which such claims could be made.

British policy towards language was not intrinsically opposed to the Assamese but the need for trained administrators was clearly biased against them since they had no experience; "of keeping written and

formal records of administration, revenue or land" (Hussain 1993: 38).

The fact that the Bengal Presidency was amongst the earliest of Britain's Indian colonies had given the emergent Bengali Hindu middle-class, the vilified *bhadraloks* or *babus*, an advantage in performing the administrative functions of the colonial state. Given the proximity of Bengal to Assam, transferring Bengali administrators into what the British perceived to be a vacuum was an obvious step, particularly given the apparent over-crowding of Bengal, in absolute terms, and particularly relative to "under-populated" Assam. This notion has remained with East Bengalis.[16] However, even in Mills' report of 1853, Maniram Dewan protested at the use of immigrant labour, when the older Ahom administrators were unemployed;

> while a number of respectable Assamese are out of employ, the inhabitants of Marwar and Bengalees from Sylhet have been appointed to Mouzdarships; and for us respectable Assamese to become the Ryots of such foreigners is a source of deep mortification. (Mills 1853: 607)

Many early British officials thought that the perpetuation of the Assamese language and culture was unlikely if massive Bengali immigration occurred. However, this was not seen as a major problem since Assamese culture was thought to revolve around opium addiction and indolence. The initial view of British

---

[16] In 1981, for example, population density per square kilometre was 254 in Assam, although the figure is much higher in the Brahmaputra Valley than in the Assam hills. West Bengal and Bangladesh had densities of 614 and 630 respectively.

officers was that Assamese was not actually a distinct language from Bengali and this was coupled by a view that, even if Assamese language and culture was different, its annihilation was not of particular importance. As Bruce argues;

> Yes, there is another very grave drawback which I believe I before noticed, namely the want of population and labourers. They will have to be imported and settled on the soil, which will be a heavy tax on the first outlay... the redundant population of Bengal, will pour into Assam, as soon as the people know they will get a certain rate of pay, as well as lands, for the support of their families. If this should be the case, the Assamese language will in a few years be extinct. (Bruce, Quoted in Griffiths 1967: 58)

Those British officers and administrators who were first to learn the Assamese language were to find that "...Bengali and Asamiya have a sizeable common vocabulary and a common script, with the exception of only two letters in the alphabet" (Guha 1980: 1717).[17] That these are the only differences is still agreed, but the emphasis changed from the similarities to the differences. Eriksen argues that Swedish, Danish and Norwegian are only considered distinctive languages due to the effects of territorial nationalism (Eriksen 1993: 104). In the Assamese case, the work of Assamese elites and American missionaries in the late nineteenth century

---

[17] The specific written differences are that the symbol for r is spelt differently in Assamese and Bengali and that the w/v sound in Assamese is non existent in Bengali. S.K. Bhuyan, writing the preface for *Assamese: Its Formation and Development*, states that "Dr. Kakati establishes for the first time the individuality of Assamese, placing it in the proper perspective of its sister languages" (Kakati 1941: vii).

secured acceptance of the idea of the difference between Assamese and Bengali. Without this protest it seems clear that, over time, the marginal differences would have declined leading to the merging of the two languages.

This legacy has led to a perception of the Bengalis as cultural imperialists, as articulated by various Assamese cultural organizations such as the *Assam Jatiyatabati Dal*, for example (see section 5.5). That it was the British who encouraged the migration of Bengali Hindus, as administrators, and other Bengalis, primarily Muslims, as farmers or tea-plantation workers, is overlooked. Once this migration had started, it became self-perpetuating, as families came over and social support bases were established. Indeed, before long, Assam was being presented as a land of opportunity, in which "hard-working" Bengalis would prove more useful for British revenue-raising purposes than "indolent" Assamese. The notion of the lazy Assamese and the characterisation of Assam as a land of opportunity, has particularly consolidated itself in Bengali consciousness.

Whereas the British primarily focused their analysis of Assam on the inhabitants of the region, and saved description of the physical environment to comments about rainfall and its suitability for tea-growing, the Bengali tradition focused much more on portraying the region of Assam as Bengal's frontier land.[18]

---

[18] For the Assamese, the Brahmaputra is the major physical defining feature of their environment. For the Ahoms it was the Nam-Dao-Phi, River of the Star God, and the resulting productivity of the region earned the title Mungdum chum kham; Land of the Golden Gardens.

Despite this, until the late nineteenth century, widespread disease discouraged much immigration.[19] Kalaazar, or black fever, which entered Assam in 1888, reduced the population of Goalpara district, for example, by 18% between 1881 and 1891. The average death rates on the tea plantations of upper Assam from 1865 to 1867 was one hundred and seventy per thousand. At one tea garden in Nowgong district, sixty-two out of one hundred and fifty people died during the second half of 1866 (Griffiths 1967: 351).

The administrative changes discussed above set the scene for the linguistic debates. Whilst Assam was part of the Bengal Presidency, from 1838 to 1871, the linguistic demands grew. The recognition of the Assamese language in 1873 went hand in hand with the subsequent establishment of Assam as a Chief Commissioner's Province in 1874, although this was primarily justified by administrative rationalization.

The mobilization of what is called, in retrospect, the Assamese middle class over the language issue was due less to an indigenous rediscovery of Assamese literature than the work of missionaries, particularly American missionaries, in their preferred use of the vernacular. Downs argues that this preference derived from three distinct influences; Evangelicalism, Baptism and America. Evangelicalism in the early nineteenth century was influenced by the French Revolution and other radical

---

[19] Despite the fact that, as Lieutenant-Colonel Matthie, an early Deputy Commissioner, suggests, "waste lands have been offered to them on very liberal terms" (Mills 1853: 76).

movements, resulting in their portrayal of social issues as religious issues; Baptists;

> as a consequence of their own status and history, had special reason to be sensitive to issues of social injustice and conditions under which the poor lived. (Downs 1989: 252)

Furthermore, because the missionaries were generally American they;

> therefore saw themselves as standing on the side of the masses over against the oppressive elites who were blamed for everything. (Downs 1989: 253-254)

That said, many of the early missionaries were closely affiliated to British officers. Miles Bronson, one of the most influential American missionaries involved in the language agitation (Hazarika 1995: 45) and publisher of the *Assamese Dictionary* in 1867 (Nag 1990: 56), wrote, on his work with the Nagas, that he was given elephants by the British to perform his work and that the Nagas had;

> ... much time for idleness and useless amusements. Our esteemed and energetic patron, Captain Jenkins, has interested himself on this subject also. (Bronson, letter to Rev. S. Peck 22 June 1840)

Although claims for linguistic recognition of Assamese were originally made by missionaries, the work of Dhekial Phukan, along with Maniram Dewan (see section 4.3) one of the earliest Assamese "nationalists",[20]

---

[20] [Andandaram Dhekial-Phukan] was in every respect a product of the modern age of enlightenment. He got his inspiration from the contemporary "Bengal Renaissance" and from what he read about England's material process and Peter the Great's reforms in medieval Russia. He dreamt of days when reforms and material progress would surely dawn on Assam. (A. Guha 1988:21)

prompted the founding of a number of small Assamese societies during the latter half of the nineteenth century; the *Assam Deshaitaishi Sabha* (Assam Patriotic Society) was founded in 1858 in Sibsagar, and a School Club was founded in Guwahati in 1869. In 1872, the *Asamiya Chattrar Sahitya Sabha* (Assamese Students Literary Society) was formed in Calcutta and, in 1888, this same group formed the *Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha* (Assamese Language Improvement Society) (I. Barua 1990: 29-30).

These groups targeted the poor standards of education in Assam, and the neglect of the Assamese language (I. Barua 1990: 19). More overtly political constitutional agitation was undertaken by the Assam Association. Active in 1882 in Sibsagar, the Assam Association was officially founded in 1903 and held its first general session at Dibrugarh in 1905 (A. Guha 1988: 64). In 1916 the *Assam Chattra Sanmilan* (Assam Students' Conference) was founded, the first of these societies organized on an "All Assam basis" (I. Barua 1990: 70). The following year, the *Assam Sahitya Sabha* (Assam Literary Society) was established, with the motto "my mother language - my eternal love".

These organizations focused upon similar issues to the later Assam Movement attempting to define a;

> linguistic-regional identity, their concern over the Government-blessed opium evil and their desire to be administered at the lower level, at least, not by recruits from Bengal. (A. Guha 1988: 335)

As has been demonstrated, these desires were more a response to the particular manner of colonial rule in the region, rather than any ethnic reawakening.

Chapter Five

The Construction of Assamese Identity; From Independence to 1977

5.0 Introduction

The period from 1947 to 1977 witnessed a dramatic increase in Assamese mobilization. New societies were founded and membership of these organizations increased. Assamese cultural organizations became more conspicuously politically active, articulating the need to protect the Assamese "way of life", in particular focusing upon language and the need to maintain a linguistic majority within the state.

The formation of the *Asom Gana Parishad* (Assam Peoples' Council) (A.G.P.) represents the culmination of this process, as the distinction between cultural and political organizations faded and an overtly Assamese political party gained control of the Legislative Assembly. As Sanjib Baruah argues, both the All Assam Students Union (A.A.S.U.) and the *Assam Sahitya Sabha* (A.S.S.), Assam's two most important cultural organizations, called themselves non-political, even from 1983 to 1985 when they effectively stopped any "constitutional" government from operating. Baruah suggests this implies that they were working for a higher body; the nation, rather than for lower, day-to-day political concerns (Baruah 1994: 660-661). Until it was accepted that the protection of Assamese culture was inherently "political", and as such needed to be dealt with within the political framework, this transition was incomplete.

It could be argued that the natural endpoint of this process would be the creation of a sovereign Assamese state. However, macro-political factors, over which the movement has no control, and internal Assamese acceptance of limited concessions, prevent this from occurring. In the case of Assam, certainly in the early 1980's, the vast majority of the population desired a change in governance but internal division, the strength and ability of the centre to resist these demands and the international state system prevented the completion of the project. Indeed it is due to this that, when the final position is achieved, cultural factors are likely to decline in importance, particularly if the regional party gains a voice at the centre where opportunities for individual advancement are greater. Since 1947, the only new states which have been formed, apart from those involved in de-colonization and the collapse of the U.S.S.R., are Eritrea and Bangladesh.

Thus although the events examined in this chapter are important in themselves, in terms of this work they are more relevant as additional tools used to finally consolidate the notion of Assameseness into a party political form and to demonstrate how a particular discourse became prevalent amongst both elite and subaltern groups in Assam.

The first section assesses the language issue and Bengali immigration. Concern about the Assamese language was given added impetus by three factors. Firstly, concerns about Bengali Muslims declaring Assamese as their mother tongue were such that Assamese elites could claim to be unsure about whether Assamese speakers were

actually in a majority in the state. Equally important, it represents a schism over whether Bengali Muslims who have adapted to the Assamese language were to be accepted as members of the Assamese community. Secondly, the growth of education made the issue more important to more people.[1] Thirdly, state reorganization gave an added impetus to the language issue as the main focus of regional identity.

The second section investigates state reorganization. It was Congress Party dominance which enabled the reorganization to be passed. Although, at the time, it was regarded as a modernizing feature by the secular elite, it is now regarded as one of the most important consolidating factors behind the resulting events. Many Assamese political activists hold the view that the reorganization of states encouraged the idea that states were culturally based rather than merely administrative units. As such, their control by a particular cultural elite appeared more natural than had previously been the case. Indeed, the manner in which the Congress Party was run in Assam, examined in the third section, gave substance to these claims.

The continued support for the Congress Party in Assam, from Independence until the Emergency, is the main justification for treating the pre-1978 period as something qualitatively different from what followed.

---

[1] For example, the use of Urdu as a mobilizing tool by the Muslim League in the 1930's and 1940's was meaningless to the majority of illiterate Muslims, only evoking "a positive response among the upper and middling strata of Muslims in the urban centres of the Punjab" (Jalal 1995: 225).

That the rise of the Assam Movement coincided with the decline of the Congress Party suggests a degree of causality, which will be examined in Chapter Six. During the immediate post-Independence period, linguistic and other cultural problems were dealt with either within the Congress Party or by cultural groups, rather than through the electoral process. Assam appears integrated into the wider India-wide political trends of the period, supporting Congress during the period of "Congress System"[2] and the Janata Dal in the post-"Emergency" elections.

One of the major causes of the Assam Movement is often argued to be economic neglect. The fourth section evaluates the portrayal of Assam, and indeed the whole northeast, as economically and socially neglected. The perception of Assam as an internal colony is felt in both state-wide terms, vis-a-vis other states in India, and by the Assamese with regard to other groups within Assam. The reasons for this perception will be traced, along with the articulation of this idea by Assamese elites.

The final section in this chapter evaluates the manner in which cultural organizations were beginning to move into an overtly political arena even before 1979. Some Assamese nationalists have argued that it is only with rising levels of education that the potential of any cultural Assamese Movement could be realized. This

---

[2] The system of government in the first two decades after Independence has been described as "a political machine based on transactional alliances which were developed around the distribution of spoils" (Manor 1989: 105). Kothari (1964) assesses the nature of the "Congress System".

viewpoint reflects western ideas of nationalism whereby the inherent attributes of the nation are portrayed as being omnipresent but the political fulfilment of these aims can only be witnessed when modernizing influences are apparent. Rather than an ever-present primordialism, at least a certain level of socialization was necessary for the Movement to attract enough support. However, the specific events of 1978-1979, and their portrayal as "ethnic" problems, were similarly vital, as the failure of previous political movements shows.

5.1 Language Policy and Bengali Immigration

As with the perpetuation of the Inner and Outer-Line system, the language debate after Independence remained similar to that which had preceded, focusing primarily upon control of the language of education.[3] Yet there were both qualitative and quantitative differences which changed the focus of protest; partition, state reorganization and the expansion of education after Independence.

Firstly, a new claim could be made against Bengali Muslim immigrants in that the region from where they migrated, east Bengal, had become a separate state; East Pakistan, until 1971 and Bangladesh thereafter. Although, previously, complaints could be made against migration from Bengal on cultural grounds, there was no constitutional impediment to these migrants moving to Assam, or at least into the Brahmaputra Valley. The formation of a separate state however, led to new grounds

---

[3] Assamese elites proposed Assamese, Bengalis both Assamese and Bengali, whilst most tribals argued for the retention of English in some form.

on which to oppose these particular immigrants. That said, the separation of Sylhet from Assam calmed Assamese fears of minoritization, at least in the short term (E.P.W. 8 December 1979).

In the early period after Independence, few complaints could be raised against the influx of Bengali Hindus from East Bengal. Although, as mentioned earlier, many had left from the 1920's onwards, few moral objections could be raised against their leaving the Muslim state of Pakistan to move to the secular state of India.[4] During the Bangladesh War of 1971, an estimated 700,000 refugees entered Assam from East Pakistan/Bangladesh, and of these it was unclear how many remained after the formation of Bangladesh (E.P.W. 8 December 1979).

Furthermore, one of the main props of Congress hegemony in the northeast was seen to be the support of "illegal" immigrants from East Pakistan (see section 5.3). Due to this situation, it is commonly argued by the Assamese (e.g. A.K. Das 1982: 58) that Congress leaders in Assam did not attempt to remove Bengali Muslims from the Brahmaputra Valley. Even when laws were passed, they were implemented half-heartedly.

In 1950, the Immigrants Act (Expulsion from Assam, Act X of 1950) was passed, in part due to the issue of potential communal violence being raised by Omeo Kumar Das, an Assamese leader, and the interest in the issue of Vallabhbhai Patel, who had earlier argued for transfers of the Hindu and Muslim populations across the

---

[4] Any immigrants who arrived from Pakistan before 26 July 1949 automatically became Indian citizens.

international boundary (Das 1982: 55). The Act provided for the deportation of any migrants from Bangladesh who had not been displaced by civil unrest. Protests from Pakistan led to the Nehru-Liaquat Pact of 8 April 1950, under which anyone who returned to India by 31 December 1950 would be considered an Indian citizen (cited in Das 1982: 346-351). The Immigrants Act was not implemented but was eventually repealed in 1957, after Patel's death.

The outcry over open support from Bengali Muslims for Pakistan during the Chinese invasion of 1962 (see section 5.4) led to the Prevention of Immigration from Pakistan to Assam Plan (P.I.P.) of 1964. Based upon the National Register of Citizens (N.R.C.) of 1951,[5] B.P. Chaliha, one of the most pro-Assamese Congress Chief Ministers, initiated the detection of illegal immigrants. In the first three years, 240,000 immigrants were identified, of whom 190,000 were deported (A.K. Das 1982: 57). Fear of losing support of immigrants caused other Congress M.L.A.'s to urge Chaliha to slow down the process. In 1969, Chaliha announced that; "no more infiltrators were to be found" (Hussain 1993: 218). Fear of losing the election of 1972 halted the process

---

[5] The N.R.C. was a transcription of certain census information from the 1951 census in Assam. It was a "secret administrative document, not open for inspection". Furthermore it was compiled by "unqualified or ill-qualified persons" and insecurity over the position of Bengali Muslims given the Nehru-Liaquat Pact may well have led to many returning after the register was compiled, in March 1951, leading to under-enumeration. In 1967 the Guwahati High Court stated that the N.R.C. was not admissible in a civil proceeding, being "directly prohibited under section 15 of the Census Act" (Chaudhury 1981: 267-268).

altogether. Despite the scale of the deportations, the importance of maintaining border controls was ignored by both state and central governments. The A.S.S. argued;

> It is claimed that 297,743 Bangladeshis were deported from Assam up to 1979. These figures are meaningless for the simple reason that almost every deported foreigner comes back to Assam in a matter of weeks or months. There is the remarkable example of one deportee who reappeared on the scene 19 times. (A.S.S. 1980: 3)

Protests by the A.A.S.U. against the ending of the P.I.P. resulted in the Government of India issuing instructions to the state government to detect foreigners on the electoral roll. Sinha, then Chief Minister, could not implement this programme as 25 Muslim M.L.A.'s refused to support it.

The difficulties of proving citizenship in a state such as India are clearly immense, particularly given the effects and upset of partition, coupled with low levels of literacy and education. One of the main contentions of the Assam Movement has been that the spuriously attained right to vote has in itself been used to provide proof of citizenship.[6] This right, it is argued, was given by the Congress Party elites to those on whom it should not have been conferred in order to maintain Congress power. It is further believed that Congress elites persuaded Bengali Muslim migrants to claim Assamese as their mother tongue in census reports, to avoid raising suspicions amongst the Assamese community and thus to perpetuate Congress rule within the state. An alternative explanation is that this was done "out of fear" (Gassah 1992: 51).

---

[6] The Assam Movement demanded proof of citizenship to be given from equally spurious documents (see section 6.1).

This move has, however, been viewed differently by various Assamese writers. Many Assamese hold a patronising view of the Bengali "*mians*" and argue that it is the Congress elites, rather than the Bengali Muslims, who are at fault. In this interpretation, the threat to the Assamese community from the immigrants stems more from their sheer weight of numbers and "vote-bank" status given the democratic nature of the state.

Rather than overt instrumentalism by Congress Party elites, discussed in the following section, it has conversely been argued that Bengali Muslims were willing to sacrifice their identity to establish themselves in Assam. As Deka, for example, argues;

> The Bengali Muslims who migrated to this state for an agricultural livelihood invariably returned Assamese as their mother tongue, since knowledge of the local language helped them tremendously in getting land and to gain acceptance in Assamese society. They also sent their children, unlike Bengali Hindus, to Assamese schools. (Deka 1976: 32)

The leftist and elitist Assamese position however compares these migrants to earlier immigrants who were seen to adapt to Assamese culture. That they were willing to sacrifice their mother tongue on census reports suggests some degree, however instrumental, of cultural assimilation. This, they argue, can be contrasted with the real "other", Bengali Hindus and Marwaris, who have taken no steps to assimilate, and are much more of an economic threat than the landless "*mians*". Indeed, in the years after Independence, both the tea-garden labourers and the East Bengal peasantry developed from being "pejoratively known... as "coolie" and "mian" to being

"given the sobriquet of "Neo-Assamese"" (Prabhakar 1972: 2142).[7]

That said, by the 1980's, the notion of being Assamese was closely linked to the perception of foreigners within the state of Assam. In part this was able to arise due to notions of "unity through diversity" such that differences were constitutionally entrenched. This led to a situation whereby blurring commonly existed in Assamese consciousness between illegal foreigners, that is, Bengali Muslims who arrived from East Pakistan or Bangladesh, and legal migrants, who had moved into Assam from elsewhere in India, particularly (west) Bengal. As the situation developed through the 1980's, the Assam Movement was forced to explicitly revert to the stricter definition as it became clear that nothing

---

[7] Monirul Hussain has argued that Muslims in Assam, rather than being a "single homogenous community" (Hussain 1987: 397) can be divided into four distinct categories; (i) Assamese Muslims, including the descendants of soldiers who stayed in Assam, medieval artisans brought into Assam by the Ahom kings, preachers and local converts during the Ahom period, (ii) Neo-Assamese Muslims, consisting of immigrants and their descendants from what is now Bangladesh, (iii) Muslims of the Barrack Valley, who moved into Cachar from the neighbouring districts of East Bengal during the British period and (iv) North Indian Muslims, those who moved into Assam primarily from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Although an interesting classification, the publication of an article in 1987 which is able to conclude that "[t]he Muslims of Assam are an inseparable part of the present day Assamese society and active partners in building its future destiny" (Hussain 1987: 401), without mentioning the calls for repatriation of immigrants seems some way short of the mark.

legally could be done to expel Indian migrants. Thus even if the Bengali Muslims had adopted the Assamese language, this was not considered enough for acceptance into the Assamese community. As Prafulla Mahanta, when Chief Minister, wrote;

> The problem of citizenship in India has been put in a melting-pot in Assam. The effects of partition, the wrong and misplaced notions of national commitment, the obligations under so-called international treaties (not even presented in parliament), and above all some convenient interpretations of the humanitarian considerations in clear derogation of the lawful rights of bona fide citizens residing in Assam and the formation of a sub-nationality having distinct culture and heritage - all these have entered into a holy alliance to promote the servile interests of a group of persons to subjugate and trample on the rights of the people of Assam. A group of people having no citizenship eligibilities or certificates as members of minority communities... have been sought to be sold as minorities in India. (Mahanta 1986: 116-117)

As will be demonstrated in Chapter Six, the change of focus to Bengali Muslims resulted in increased support for the United Liberation Front of Assam (U.L.F.A.) who were able to, illegally, pressurize west Bengali and Marwari immigrants.

Secondly, Independence brought a massive expansion in education throughout India and grievances over language became focused towards control of education and consequent opportunities within the state sector, requiring pre-eminence for Assamese.

In 1960, agitation by the *Assam Sahitya Sabha* led to serious disturbances by Assamese-speakers demanding that Assamese became the official language of the state. This resulted in counter-agitations by Bengali-speakers (Dube 1977: 459). The Assam Official Language Act, despite

making Assamese the official language of the state, "formally recognized the special position of English in the hills and of Bengali in the district of Cachar" (Chaube 1973: 122). The passing of the Act led to resentment in the hill areas and the formation of the All Party Hill Leaders Conference, and thus encouraged the process by which the hill areas broke away (Gassah 1992: 43).

In 1972, further rioting broke out as Guwahati University called for the introduction of Assamese as the language of instruction, with two exceptions;

> 1. English was to be retained as the language of instruction for a period of time; and
> 2. students would be permitted to answer their examination questions in English and Bengali, as well as in Assamese. (Weiner 1978: 117)

This protest also followed the publication of the 1971 Census which showed a greater Bengali speaking population than was expected after the previous Census. This derived from the changing structure of the Congress Party, and the role of the Chief Minister Chaudhury. A Bengali Muslim, Chaudhury attempted to reassert Bengali Muslim rights and encouraged the community to proclaim Bengali, rather than Assamese, as their language (Sharma 1980: 1323).

After Assamese students protested against the maintenance of Bengali, the University withdrew this option. Complaints by Bengalis on the basis of Article 30 of the Indian Constitution,[8] led to widespread anti-

---

[8] All minorities, whether based on religion or language, shall have the right to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice. (Constitution of India: Article 30)

Bengali rioting. Eventually a compromise was reached between Indira Gandhi and the A.A.S.U. whereby recommendations regarding the language of instruction by Guwahati and Dibrugarh Universities would be followed and Assamese would be made a compulsory subject in all non-Assamese schools in the state. The movement was called off, but both Bodos and Bengalis felt that their position was being threatened by Assamese imperialism.

5.2 State Reorganization

One of the major impetuses for the language debate occurring at this time was that state reorganization, as well as Assamese becoming the official language, was seen to imply that the Assamese should have more power within *their* state. State reorganization was justified by Indian elites through promoting administrative rationalization, yet it implicitly suggested that a state for the Assamese was to be created. Although most Assamese realized that it was more due to demands by the tribal regions within Assam that the restructuring was taking place,[9] the notion of an Assamese homeland increased in salience.

---

[9] As B.P. Singh argues;

> the tribal elite... were highly proficient in English, accepted western dress and modes of living and were keen to become chief ministers and ministers of their own lands. (Singh 1996: 22)

From an alternative standpoint, Monirul Hussain claims that;

> The present Chief Ministers of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Meghalaya can speak Asamiya as fluently as the present Chief Minister of Assam. (M. Hussain 1993: 245)

Although state reorganization was generally predicated on the basis of linguistic homogeneity, the justification for the restructuring of the northeast was not. The Report of the State Reorganization Commission of 1955, which approved the state division of the south of India on the basis of linguistic difference (see section 2.4), actually argued for the unification of the autonomous districts of the northeast into Assam proper. That is, that Tripura, Manipur, the former native states (Chaube 1973: 189), and the North East Frontier Agency (N.E.F.A.) should rejoin Assam on the grounds that they were too small to be viable. Within two decades the reverse occurred; greater division rather than unification, but not for linguistic reasons. In 1971, presenting the North Eastern Areas Reorganization Bill, K.C. Pant, the Minister of State in the Ministry for Home Affairs, stated;

> ...the basic object of the Bill is to restructure the administrative set-up in the north-eastern region so as to equip it for the bigger task of development of the region and to promote the welfare of the people of the area. (Agrahayana 23, 1893 1971: 112)

The point being that the reorganization was less intended to consolidate an Assamese identity than to restructure the administration of the area, providing statehood for the tribal regions; Manipur and Tripura, and Union Territory status for Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh. It was the tribal leaders in those areas, the new middle class whose aspirations were being held back by the Assamese, that had pressed for the changes, rather than any Assamese movement working for a more homogenous Assamese state. Indeed, the major justification given was

simple administrative rationalization, and perhaps military necessity, the existing system being inherited from the unclear and divisive British policies. As Pant argued;

> The north-eastern region at present consists of two States, namely Assam and Nagaland and the two union territories of Manipur and Tripura. Within Assam itself, we have N.E.F.A. which is constitutionally a part of that state but is administered by the Central Government as if it is a Union Territory. Then we have six autonomous districts which are administered under the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution. These are the Garo Hills, the United Khasi and Jaintia Hills, Jowai, Mikir Hills, North Cachar Hills and Moizo districts. The rest of Assam, comprises six districts in the Brahmaputra Valley and the Cachar district. The three autonomous districts of Garo Hills, the United Khasi and Jaintia Hills and Jowai form the autonomous state of Meghalaya within Assam. (Agrahayana 23, 1893 1971: 103)

The potential effect of consolidating the state of Assam, whilst simultaneously maintaining a sizable Bengali minority therein, was recognized at the time. Prabhakar argues that Cachar[10] should have been separated from the rest of Assam, thereby concluding; "that dream of the Assamese middle classes - a homeland for their language" in which culture and geography closely overlap (Prabhakar 1972: 2142).[11] Similarly, the effect of

---

[10] According to the 1971 Census of India, 71.76% of the population of Cachar/Barak Valley district were Bengali speakers (Quoted in Hussain 1993: 238).

[11] But Prabhakar accepts that there were other unresolved "contradictions" in Assamese society, particularly the relationship with the Plains Tribals and the Neo-Assamese which, given the speed with which the peripheral regions split from Assam after Independence, may well have led to further division. However, he believed that, after achieving linguistic unity, the

immigration into Tripura, the population of which was 80% Bengali, could have been recognized and Cachar district merged with Tripura. Alternatively, Basumatari, M.L.S. for Kokrajhar, argued that Assam should have been further consolidated by removing the tribal regions of the North Cachar and Mikir Hills, to protect the tribals remaining within Assam (Agrahayana 30, 1893 1971: 55).[12]

However, throughout the Bill there was no discussion of how the Bill would benefit Assam, rather how it would benefit the adjoining tribal areas. The similarity of this with previous administrative changes, which were primarily aimed at appeasing or displeasing Bengal, was not lost on many Assamese nationalists. Yet again they perceived themselves to be hapless pawns, used to mollify more influential adjoining areas.

A major cause of the lack of protest at the time was that many within the state of Assam recognized the implications in terms of political power rather more than the central Congress Ministers. Firstly, Assamese would become consolidated as the language of the state, many of the tribals having argued for a maintenance of English.

"real", that is, class and economic, divisions would prove easier to resolve.

[12] It is interesting to note the comparison between this debate and that which occurred in Northern Ireland at Eire's independence. Claims were made for a nine county solution, providing population parity for both Protestants and Catholics within Northern Ireland, a six county solution, which was finally chosen, or a four county solution in which Protestants would have a much greater majority.

Secondly, given the development of political power in the northeast, state boundaries have become important in relation to conceptions of identity. That is, notions of identity in the region are closely related to the administrative unit.[13] This spatial consolidation gave an obvious impetus for the construction of a more chauvinistic identity focusing itself on the official territorial borders.

As the tribal regions around Assam broke away, a new plains, caste-Hindu, Assamese identity was consolidated.[14] At this moment the very notion of being Assamese changed. The term Assam had always been closely related to the land, and when this included almost the entire northeast, the relationship between Assamese speakers and the hill tribals was clearly an integral part of the "imagined community". The notion that the Assamese were protectors of the tribal people[15] and that the northeast contains "Seven Sisters" (Baruah 1994) had to change given the administrative restructuring.

---

[13] As Anderson has argued, territorial nationalism has proved a potent force in creating an "imagined community" based on the administrative unit in post-colonial states (Anderson 1991: 52).

[14] Mizoram achieved Union Territory status in 1971 and full statehood in 1987. Nagaland achieved statehood in 1963 and Meghalaya, Manipur and Tripura in 1972.

[15] Despite the fact that the caste-Hindu Assamese have latterly been perceived by many to suppress even advanced groups such as the Bodos and Ahoms (e.g. Rafiabadi 1988: 2, Gohain 1985: 36).

Simultaneously however, those groups which were not in the (new) dominant Assamese coalition, argued that they too were entitled to states, leading to;

> demands for a separate hill state in the autonomous districts, an Ahom homeland in the Sibsagar and Lakhimpur district, and a Kamata state in the Goalpara. (Deka 1976: 34)

Previous divisions used by the British resurfaced as the basis for further regional reorganization. The Autonomous State Demand Council (A.S.D.C.) was formed to secure an Autonomous State for the Karbi people of Karbi Anglong on the basis of the Sixth Schedule; a move which was finally realized on 12 September 1995. The difference of this region had already been noted within the Assam Official Language Act. Karbi Anglong district, along with North Cachar, was able to continue using English for official purposes.

In effect then, the dominant Assamese community consolidated its power in the state of Assam and presented itself as the embodiment of an Assamese speaking identity, whilst simultaneously other groups, although linguistically similar, claimed political rights for themselves on the basis of cultural difference. The result was to emphasize the heterogeneity of the region, and gave the impression that political demands were best made through emphasizing these differences, rather than through articulating an inclusive regional identity.

The regional reorganization of the 1970's continued a trend in which the relationship with tribals had been changing since Independence, despite the many regional links. As S.C. Marak, present Chief Minister of Meghalaya, commented;

> Geography has created a common identity of the North Eastern States due to shared constraints on development in trade, commerce, communications and investment requirements. (Indian Express 9 July 1996)

The introduction of reservations and the Sixth Schedule for Scheduled Tribes had led many groups to assert their tribal identities at the expense of their Assamese, i.e. northeast Indian, identity.[16] The effect of this was to halt the process by which both tribals and plains Assamese had been borrowing cultural artifacts from each other. The most oft-quoted examples of the Assamese adoption of tribal customs are that Assamese Brahmins eat both meat and fish, whilst weaving is an honourable occupation for women, unlike the rest of India (Datta ed. 1994: 13).

Many liberals have argued that this assimilation was the prime feature of a northeast regional identity. The ending of this process consolidated a more xenophobic, inward looking Assamese identity, and more vociferous tribal identities, as the Assamese group represented a smaller and smaller proportion of the inhabitants of the northeast. The reorganization of states was the third

---

[16] Apocryphal stories of tribals abusing the system are common. For example, in 1976, Member of the Lok Sabha Dasaratha Deb argued that the Laskars in Tripura become a Scheduled Caste rather than a Scheduled Tribe as they had allegedly gained land through their tribal status and sold it using their Bengali status (Gallanter 1984: 151). Heuze-Brigant gives a similar example from Singrauli, where those dispossessed after the building of a dam articulated a tribal identity and gained support from environmental lobbies despite there being; "no tribal society inside or in the immediate vicinity of the tribal zone" (Heuze-Brigant 1991: 312).

political action which affected this relationship.

Both the manner of British rule, culminating in Inner and Outer-Line policies (see sections 2.4 and 4.3) and reservations policy (see section 2.4), similarly widened the cleavage between tribals and plains Assamese, such that notions of Assameseness in the 1980's, although recognising the importance of the closeness of the relationship, were based on completely different precepts to those of, say, 1900.

This has also led to a situation in which some Assamese are requesting the same level of protection for "their" group as has been awarded to tribals, on the basis of their relationship with the tribals. Indeed the Congress Party in Assam has appeared happy to comply with these demands since the Assam Movement began, particularly under the leadership of Hiteshwar Saikia who was commonly seen to operate a policy of divide and rule with regard to the indigenous Assamese. In the 1996 Congress (I) Manifesto the completion of the process of enlisting "Ahom, Maran, Matak, Chutia and Tea and ex-tea labourers (Tea Tribes)" into the Scheduled Tribe schedule was promised (Congress Party 1996: 18). The previous Congress government had "provided for Bodoland Autonomous Council and the Councils for Rabhas, Tiwas and Misings" (Congress Party 1996: 17). The United Peoples' Party of Assam claimed in response that the granting of;

> so-called autonomy without demarcation of boundaries endanger[s] the lives of thousands of non-tribals living for generations and creating permanent enmity between them. (U.P.P.A. 1996: 3)

5.3 Congress Party Dominance

The relationship, discussed in Chapter Two, between the Congress Party and the nationalist movement was such that opposition to the Congress Party implied an opposition to Independence, thus guaranteeing Congress hegemony for at least the first generation thereafter. The political and electoral outcome of this was that state-centre disputes developed into more clearly defined sub-nationalist movements than perhaps needed to be the case. The development of the parliamentary system and consequent relative decline of Congress power at the centre, resulted in the party adopting a more ideologically coherent approach, particularly under the leadership of Indira Gandhi, thereby allowing other parties to increase their support on the basis of alternative ideologies.

Despite the growing grievances regarding the language issue and immigration, Assam provided the Congress Party with almost complete support, at least in electoral terms. From 1946 to 1977, the state government was continuously controlled by the Congress Party. It has been argued that those groups who felt themselves peripheral to any mainstream Indian identity, particularly Muslims, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and in Assam tea garden labourers (Deka 1976: 44), show higher signs of political participation than other groups. This can be ascribed to attempts to legitimize their separate status and rights, through gaining the support of the ruling party, in return for giving their electoral mandate.

> Subsequently, their self-protective tendency has led them, in state as well as national elections, to vote more for the party most likely to win than for

> parties representing class or community appeals particular to their condition. (Rudolph and Rudolph 1987: 47)

Anecdotal evidence suggests that, after the decline of the Congress Party, Muslims in Maharashtra have even voted for the B.J.P..

In Assam however, the most important influence was the nature of the Congress Party in the state. Unlike elsewhere in India, particularly the "Hindi Heartland", the Congress Party was not run through landlords and their proxies. Rather, it was dominated by high-caste Assamese, changing during the late 1960's into a coalition of backward-caste Hindus and Bengalis.

The use of illegal vote banks by the Congress Party were safe whilst Congress ran the Legislative Assembly. As will be demonstrated (see section 6.1) when a non-Congress government came to power, the issue of previous Congress corruption was available to encourage anti-Congress feeling. The blind eye turned to illegal immigration from East Bengal by Congress certainly merely saved up problems for the future (J. Singh 1984: 1059). As the E.P.W. reported;

> The problem of the influx was underplayed by successive Congress governments because the immigrants, often illegally present and always afraid of exposure, blindly voted under the direction of village chiefs with whom the Congress established close links. (E.P.W. 8 December 1979)

The 1969 mid-term elections would appear to support the above argument. Voting turn-out in the polls averaged 49%, although the highest turn-out occurred "in Barpeta and Dhubri [where] more than 60% and 63% of the electorate exercised their franchise" (Deka 1976: 45).

Both of these constituencies had a sizable Muslim population and a Muslim candidate.

Indeed, it is widely believed that immediately upon arrival in Assam, Pakistani/Bangladeshi immigrants registered themselves as voters to establish resident status and in return provided support for the Congress Party (for example, Das 1982: 32, Gassah 1992: 6). A memorandum of the A.A.S.U. claimed that;

> The first thing the foreign nationals try is to control their names in the voters' list with the connivance of the anti-social leaders, politicians and officials on this side of the border. The motive is crystal-clear. The infiltrators vote for the politicians who protect them in all respects. (Quoted in Trivedi 1995: 636)

This manifested itself in continued, if declining, Congress electoral success. The percentage Congress Party vote for Legislative Assembly elections declined gradually during the first four elections eventually dropping from 48% in 1962 to 43% (Deka 1976: 37) in 1967. Yet, given the famine in Assam in 1966, which was primarily blamed on a failure of the (Congress) state government distribution system (Deka 1976: 33) and the Chinese invasion of 1962, this still represented a major victory.[17]

The mid-term election of 1970 resulted in a Congress (R) clean sweep of Assam's Lok Sabha seats, securing 60.83% of the vote. As elsewhere, this can be attributed to Indira Gandhi's mobilization of particular sectors, through appeals to caste, religious and community

---

[17] According to Chief Minister B.P. Chaliha, the famine deaths were in fact due to malnutrition, the; "outcome of not taking balanced diets" (Deka 1976: 33).

affiliations. The policy of *garibi hatao* (remove poverty) implied a shift from caste to class politics, yet Indira Gandhi's populism still relied on conciliating specific groups[18];

> in Gujarat the KHAM strategy: Kshatriyas, Harijans, Adivasis and Muslims, in UP Brahmins, Rajput Thakurs, lower castes and minorities such as Harijans and Muslims. (Jalal 1995: 213)

In Assam a combination of tea garden workers, Muslim and rural votes formed the dominant coalition and this was represented in the cabinet of the new Chief Minister, Chaudhury. The 26 strong cabinet included four Muslims, six members of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and three representatives of linguistic minorities. Of the remainder, four were Brahmins, and the rest non-Brahmin.

This trend was consolidated under Sinha and by the end of 1971, control of the Congress Party had shifted to an alliance of Other Backward Castes, Scheduled Castes and Tribes, Bengalis, Muslims and tea garden tribals. The high caste Assamese which had previously dominated the Party were adversely affected by the more populist policies of Indira Gandhi and consequent attempts to broaden the base of Congress Party support. This coalition remained intact until the collapse of Saikia's Ministry in 1985.[19]

---

[18] In the 1980's a more explicit appeal to Hindu chauvinism, particularly with regard to Sikhs, by Rajiv Gandhi was still accompanied by appeals to Muslim voters, as in the Shah Bano case (see section 2.3).

[19] This scenario recurs throughout India. Under the Syndicate, although unrepresentative, the state Congress Parties were dominated by the most politically influential groups within the state. Under Indira

The new support base of the Congress Party and the division of the northeast into separate states adversely affected the upper-caste Assamese Hindus' self-perception. Although they may have over-exaggerated their powers in the 1950's and 1960's, after 1972 their influence was clearly drastically reduced. However, this new coalition did prove electorally successful. Congress support in the 1972 Legislative Assembly elections peaked at 53% (B.P. Singh 1996: 79).

Despite this, many of the alternative (Assamese) political parties founded in the late 1960's and early 1970's were equally affected by the more populist Congress tactics, particularly at local level. The construction, after Assamese protests, of two small oil refineries and an adoption of many P.L.P. policies and attitudes by senior Congress politicians,[20] resulted in electoral failure for these groups (see section 5.5).

Gandhi's leadership, top-down appointments of favoured politicians, the emphasis on winning national, rather than state elections and a greater willingness to interfere in state's affairs, homogenized the Congress coalition on an India-wide basis, rather than reflecting regional differences.

[20] The power of the Assamese elite in the Congress Party before the 1970's was demonstrated by the leadership of B.P. Chaliha. In 1968, Chaliha;

> had to give a clarification... that by "Assam for Assamese", he meant the economic and employment development of the state. (Deka 1976: 48)

5.4 The Hinterland Notion

The Assam Movement has used various economic and social circumstances to reinforce the perception that Assam is a colonial hinterland within the Indian Union. The importance for this thesis is the method whereby these ideas have been used to consolidate the Assamese identity in relation to other, economically privileged and stigmatized, groups.[21]

The perception of Assam as a colonial hinterland is a commonly held belief by many Assamese and an image used by the Assam Movement to justify their demands. The purpose of this section is two-fold. Firstly, to examine the claims made by the Assam Movement and by the Assamese elite in general, to attempt to establish the popularity of the notion that Assam is exploited and, conversely, to examine the responses that have attempted to deny this idea.

The claims made by Assamese groups have also been made on behalf of the northeast as a whole and, indeed, all of eastern India, that is, the northeast, West Bengal, Orissa and Bihar. One clear explanation for this is the declining role of Calcutta. Replaced as the capital of India by New Delhi in 1911, Calcutta suffered further through partition, the shift to Bombay as the major trading port in India and from the alleged bias towards the Hindi Heartland by elites in New Delhi.

The internal colony model is popular due to the fact that Assam is rich in natural resources but appears to benefit little from this. "In many ways, Assam is the

---

[21] This approach is derived from Hechter's "internal colonialism" model (see section 1.1).

richest state in India" (A.K. Das 1982: 1). Over half of India's oil and natural gas was produced in Assam until 1977 and 1979 respectively (Misra 1980: 1361), declining proportionally after that due to discoveries elsewhere in India (Hussain 1993: 74). It was not until the start of the Assam Movement, in 1981, that the Assam Oil Company and Oil India Limited were nationalized, both previously being 49% owned by British companies.

Despite the only oil refinery in Assam, at Digboi, having been built in 1901, the increased expansion in production after Independence in Assam necessitated the construction of a large refinery in Barauni, Bihar, against the advice of Soviet experts who recommended it to be situated in Silghat, Nowgong. This political, rather than economic, decision required a 1400 kilometre pipeline to be built, an easy target during the agitation of the 1980's. When two small refineries were eventually constructed in Assam it was, again, the result of previous agitation.

Fifty-five per cent of India's tea is produced in Assam, although it is commonly assumed (e.g. Hussain 1993: 71) that profits are concealed and thus the state's share of revenue is reduced. Despite the Guwahati Tea Auction Centre being the largest in volume in the world, the headquarters of the Indian Tea Board and the larger tea gardens are outside the state, primarily in Calcutta and London, thus most of the higher paid jobs connected with the industry are elsewhere. That many of the tea plantations are British owned and these are generally the most profitable, suggests another grievance with resource allocation within Assam.

The forestry industry is again perceived to be biassed against the Assamese. Sixty per cent of India's plywood is produced in Assam (A.K. Das 1982: 1), but none of the plywood factories are owned by the Assamese. The Assamese government received only 3,500,000 Rupees in 1980 from sales tax on plywood, as against 60,000,000 Rupees by the Indian government, primarily as there are no Assamese sales depots (Hussain 1993: 77).

Other mineral supplies within Assam are unexploited. Of an estimated one billion tonnes of coal reserves in Assam, only 558,000 are mined annually. Iron ore is "virtually untouched" (A.K. Das 1982: 230), as is the potential hydro-electric power within the state.

Furthermore, per capita investment, as provided by the Sixth Plan, for example, actually allocated less than the India-wide average for Assam.[22] Despite the 1981 National Committee on Backward Areas reporting that, except in the oil, tea and forestry producing areas of Upper Assam, all other districts were industrially backward, the North-Eastern Council stated that; "no one can complain about the lack of resources for the state" (North Eastern Council 1980: 31).

The notion that an independent Assam would be economically viable is based on the vast amount of natural resources in the state and, although most realize the improbability of independence occurring due to geo-political realities, that it exists at all is due to this

---

[22] Assam was to receive 448 Rupees per capita, as against a national average of 557 Rupees. The other six states of the northeast were all to receive much more than the average, Nagaland, for example, with 2,692 Rupees (North Eastern Council 1980: 31).

perceived economic advantage. The demands made in the Assam Accord (see Appendix D) and in the aims of the A.G.P. (see Appendix E), for example, suggest that a rectification of this economic backwardness would do much to appease Assamese groups. The problem, however, is that benefits from industrialization are seen to go to non-Assamese groups within the state, such as Bengali Hindus and Marwaris. It is this observation that led a "senior journalist of Gauhati" to call for inhabitants of Meghalaya to oppose the extension of the railway into that state since "a few years of backwardness may be preferable to the exploitation of the State by others from outside" (B.P. Singh 1996: 60)

This has led to a situation whereby terms such as development and industrialization are portrayed by the Assamese elite as being in the interests of non-Assamese citizens (B.P. Singh 1987: 169). This can be seen as a continuation of the lack of Assamese control over the tea plantations and economy from the nineteenth century (see section 4.2).

The hinterland notion need not only be applied to economic policies. Widespread resentment exists in Assam due to the Indian national anthem, which names all the states of India except for Assam, possibly due to Rabindranath Tagore's inability to find anything to rhyme with Assam (Weiner 1978: 116). However, in popular perception, this is regarded as yet another example of Bengali cultural imperialism.

Immediately after Independence, the northeast was isolated from the rest of India since Rangpur, through which road and rail links passed, was transferred to

Pakistan. Not until 1950 were replacement links constructed (Das 1982: 16). Similarly the protests which occurred before the second bridge over the Brahmaputra was built and without which it apparently would not have been constructed, reinforce this perception of spatial and intellectual isolation (see section 4.3).

The idea that New Delhi elites were disinterested in the region was reinforced in 1962, only two years after the first major language riots. The Chinese invasion prompted All India Radio to;

> call for sacrifices in pursuit of a just war. The Hindu past was resurrected to remind Indians not only of the sacred nature of the Himalayan border but also of battles in which right had been on the side of the defeated. The Hindu scriptures were interpreted to apply to the current conflict. The epic of the Mahabharata was particularly apposite with its story of the godlike heroes of the Battle of Kurukshetra. (Edwardes 1971: 306-307)

During the war the Chinese army invaded the N.E.F.A. and reached the tea gardens of Upper Assam.[23] Fear of an invasion of Assam led to Nehru's infamous broadcast in which he;

> made a pathetic farewell address over the radio on November 12, 1962, "My heart goes out to the people of Assam", he said. (A.K. Das 1982: 17)

Thus, the Assam Movement was able to consolidate sub-nationalist support through reference to the centre's apparent lack of concern for the northeast. As the E.P.W.

---

[23] By the middle of November 1962 the Chinese had established themselves in N.E.F.A., as well as Ladakh in the west. A week later they were only 49 miles from Tezpur and controlled Walong, which opened up the route to the Digboi oilfields. They unilaterally withdrew on 21 November 1962.

reported, in 1979; "Today, the Assamese are being made to recall [Nehru's broadcast]" (E.P.W. 8 December 1979).[24]

One of the methods used to deny the "hinterland notion" is the portrayal of the region as a miniature India. The notion of unity through diversity, as discussed in Chapter Two, has been used both by Indian nationalists to justify the position of the northeast in the Indian Union, and by Assamese Congress elites. The Assam Pradesh Congress Committee Resolution Re-Organization of Assam (May 20 1967) opposed the restructuring of the northeast on the basis that;

> The hill and the plains areas of Assam are so inter-linked geographically and inter-dependent economically and otherwise that the existence and development of one without the other is not possible... Ethnically and socially Assam with a background of an admixture of races and cultures presents an image of unity in diversity. (Quoted in V.R Trivedi 1995: 406)

Indeed this notion of difference in the northeast recurs throughout writing on the region;

> The state of Assam is one of the most interesting parts of India from the ethnological point of view for some of the most picturesque tribes had their homes here. (Bahadur 1977: 1)

> But the foremost feature of the social order of northeast India is its heterogeneity. The region is inhabited by three major groups... Within each group there is tremendous variety; in terms of race (probably greater variety than in any other part of the globe); language (as many as 420 languages and dialects); and religion. (B.P. Singh 1987: 258)

---

[24] Another example of Assamese perceptions of other Indians as prejudiced towards them comes from the use of the term *mota asami* as an insult throughout much of north India. The term describes a lazy fat person, who deserves to be robbed. *Asami* is itself Bengali for "criminal".

Perhaps, nowhere in the world is found such cultural, religious, linguistic and ethnic diversity as found in the northeast. (Indian Express July 9 1996)

Assam with Nepal helped very largely in the absorption of this Kirata element in the formation of the North Indian (Hindu) people. This can be looked upon as Assam's great contribution to the Synthesis of Cultures and Fusion of Races that took place in India. (Chatterji 1955: 11)

On one level, the usage of this metaphor is simply a recognition that differences do exist, which is perhaps not surprising given the prevailing view that tribal culture and minority languages, for example, are to be maintained. On another level, these ideas of difference are played down by most Assamese, who view their (dominant) relationship with the hill tribals as the defining characteristic of social relationships in the northeast;

> The "unenduring, wooden-headed and insensitive" attitude of the Assamese elite has not only alienated the tribals and other non-Assamese minorities but in fact, continues to do so. (S.K. Das 1994: 47)

In the Assamese perception, the linkages between hill tribals and plains Assamese, rather than division on the basis of any classifiable difference, is the main point of reference.

Writing in 1972, Prabhakar argued that;

> For too long the Assamese people have been fobbed off with pious rhetoric about Assam being a "miniature India", a home for many nationalities, just like the mother country. If the analogy were really valid, the Assamese language should at least have enjoyed the same position vis-a-vis the other languages of this miniature India, as Hindi does

> vis-a-vis the languages of the mother country. (E.P.W. 21 October 1972: 2142)

The effects of this division are clearly difficult to categorize. The legitimacy given to tribal customs has given political and economic rights, originally in the hands of the Assamese, to the tribals themselves. The selling of the northeast as a colourful pageant, to encourage tourism and to legitimize Indian rule in the face of Chinese territorial claims, similarly emphasizes difference. Indeed, this latter point perhaps reaffirms the Assamese claim that their political situation is not in their hands (see also sections 4.3 and 5.2).

There is perhaps a similarity with the other peripheral region of India; Kashmir. Whereas the state of Jammu and Kashmir is essential to legitimize India's claim to be a secular state, being the only non-Hindu majority state, so perhaps the northeast is essential as it reflects the overall diversity of India, particularly within Assam, in a single state.

5.5 The Development of Cultural Organizations into Political Movements

The development of Assam from a territorial description, in the early nineteenth century, to a cultural category, has been documented thus far. The final development traced in this thesis is the utilization of this community, through the use of cultural markers, for a political purpose. As argued in Chapter One, the linkages between the cultural and the political are complex. Until 1979, cultural signifiers were used for political purposes, but generally not within the party political framework. However, there were previous attempts to create sub-nationalist parties before 1979 and these

early moves into an overtly political sphere will be traced in this section.

Furthermore, cultural organizations, such as the A.S.S., became more politicized, whilst other organizations, such as the *Assam Yuvak Samaj* (Assam Youth Society), a youth organization founded in 1965 by Ambikagiri Raichowdhury, articulated Assamese cultural values explicitly in terms of anti-Bengali sentiments.

These developments generally came from disaffected Assamese members of existing political parties, in contrast to the later A.G.P. which derived its support primarily from the A.A.S.U. and Assamese cultural organizations, with additional support from these existing parties. For example, the *Purbanchaliya Loka Parishad* (Democratic Peoples' Council) (P.L.P.), was formed by Gauri Saukar Bhattacharjee in the mid 1960's; "who left the Communist Party because of his alleged grave differences with the Communist leaders over the language issue" (Chauhan 1972: 377). The P.L.P. nominated four candidates in the Lok Sabha elections of 1970, and "secured a very unimpressive percentage of votes" (Deka 1976: 42). The P.L.P. pressed for industrial development and opposed the centre for its apparent neglect of the region. Its 1978 election manifesto explicitly called for unification of the northeast to fight against the "colonial exploitation" of the centre (Gassah 1992: 53).

However, despite its slogan "Assam for the Assamese" clearly attempting to secure support on the basis of anti-immigrant feeling, the P.L.P. definition of an Assamese as an Indian citizen who lived in Assam and felt like being Assamese, in an attempt to gain support from

migrants, highlights a problem prevalent in the Assamese community. The Assamese group has always been a mixture of differing peoples who have arrived at different times. On the one hand there is a hope that the Bengalis will themselves adapt and become "Assamese". On the other hand it represents a desire to protect the "traditional" Assamese culture which, contradictorily has been based upon assimilation.

This presents a similar paradox to that regarding historical writing (highlighted in section 3.2). As with any region, through emphasizing different features of its history, a different viewpoint can be articulated. In the Assamese case, certain discourses and ideas dominate with the intention of creating a particular contemporary identity and corresponding view of the past, overlooking alternative cultural interpretations.

The P.L.P.'s inability to consolidate support from "indigenous" Assamese, due to its fear of appearing too xenophobic, coupled with some industrial projects instigated by Indira Gandhi, particularly the construction of Assam's third oil refinery in the early 1970's led to its electoral failure. Although its electoral base consisted of high caste Hindus (Chauhan 1972: 377) it was unable to secure enough support amongst this group, nor appeal to a wider section of the population. In the elections of 1978 again, it gained no seats and in 1985 the P.L.P. amalgamated into the newly formed A.G.P. (Gassah 1992: 13).

The *Assam Jatiyatabadi Dal* (Assam Nationalist Party) (A.J.D.) was perhaps the most parochial of these early parties. Its President, Girin Barua, allegedly claimed;

> Whenever they (Bengalees) get a chance they try to suppress us. This is why we have had clashes with the Bengalees since 1837. Whenever there is a movement or demand they always say the movement is against Bengalees. (A.K. Das 1982: 67)

Whereas the P.L.P. estimated the number of foreigners to be 1,300,000, the A.J.D. claimed that 4,000,000 were living within Assam (Hussain 1993: 134).

The *Ujani Assam Rajya Parishad* (see section 3.2), the P.L.P. and the A.J.D. failed in part due to their exclusive definitions of the Assamese community, but also due to the manner of Congress rule. Congress elites in Assam adopted a similar anti-centrist posture which, coupled with Indira Gandhi's occasional economic appeasement, suggested that the solution to Assam's problems lay through working within the Congress Party, rather than against it. The change in the internal organization of the Congress Party, accompanied by nationwide developments, rather than any shift of policy by Assamese elites, led to the events of the late 1970's.

Furthermore, all of the main Assamese cultural/political groups; the *Ujani Assam Rajya Parishad*, the A.S.S., the A.A.S.U. and the *All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad* (All Assam People's Struggle Council) (see section 6.1) refer to *Asom* or Assam, rather than to the Assamese, suggesting an inclusivity referring to the land of Assam (S. Baruah 1986: 1186), despite the geographical territory of Assam itself having changed dramatically, rather than an exclusivity based on a difficult to define and electorally less popular Assamese group.

The main cause of the failure of these sub-nationalist political parties was the all encompassing

role of the Congress Party in Assam, as elsewhere in India (see section 5.2). These early parties derived from and helped consolidate, notions regarding territorial rights and the relationship with immigrants but, due to the control held by the Congress Party, were unable to form a mass movement for these aims.

The decline of Congress Power at the centre and its changing organization within the state led to its defeat in the 1978 elections. This corresponded with a greater success for the regional parties. Both the P.L.P. and the A.J.D. failed to win seats in the election, but through their articulation of the foreigners' issue "very tacitly helped in the defeat of several candidates of the Left parties" (Hussain 1993: 100).

Chapter Six

Political Events; 1978-1997

6.0 Introduction

By 1978, the Assamese elite was in a position to set the political agenda within the state. The protests which broke out after large numbers of foreigners were observed on the electoral roll at a bye-election in Mangaldoi are generally regarded as the initial cause of the Assam Movement (for example S. Baruah 1986: 1191, J. Singh 1984: 1062). This was in fact the final spark after a year-long series of events, most of which were not in themselves "ethnic" but were able to be portrayed as such, both by the overt leaders of the movement and by the Assamese vernacular press. As in the discussion of myth (see section 1.3) the original cause was less important than accepted perception, itself affected through elite representation, which in time becomes an unquestioned truth.

Despite political wrangling over the electoral rolls between the Congress Party and the Assam Movement from 1979, elections were still held in 1983, against the advice of many in Assam, on the basis of the unamended rolls. Deeply engrained notions of difference, produced by decades of communal socialization, resulted in various massacres in the run-up to the elections. The complete lack of any feeling of commonality between Indian citizens in the state of Assam, coupled with the lack of any substantial cross-cutting cleavages within groups, provides the background to these events. The existence of perceived foreigners, the Bangladeshi immigrants, has to

be seen in a context in which they were targeted along with other groups.

Although the "foreigners" perhaps suffered the worst atrocities, they were by no means the only target of communal violence and *Bharatiya Janata Party* (B.J.P.) attempts to portray the situation as such are clearly politically motivated. As in other examples, such as the former Yugoslavia (see Cigar 1995), although the breakdown in ethnic accommodation may appear instantaneous, it instead reflects a historical situation which, in a certain political climate, is able to be manipulated.

The massive mandate given to Rajiv Gandhi in the elections following Indira Gandhi's assassination resulted in a new strategy towards peripheral problems, particularly in the Punjab and the northeast. Rajiv Gandhi attempted a more blatantly policy to appease divisions, through the allocation of grants and benefits.

The coming to power of the *Asom Gana Parishad* (A.G.P.) in 1985 marked the end-point of the Assam Movement. On achieving power in the state, every-day political concerns took precedence over cultural politics. Subrata Mitra argues that, as sub-nationalist movements mobilize "their" community, the initial intensity recedes. Once the movement achieves dominance, there is a "rapid loss of intensity as power imposes its own logic", until the movement is "banalised" (Mitra 1997: 27).

The failure of the 1985-1990 A.G.P. government can be ascribed to strategic factors, which are perhaps an inevitable result in the decline of cultural intensity

caused by the success of the previous movement. Rising levels of corruption and violence, an inability to deliver economic promises and a consolidated campaign by the Congress (I) Party, both at the centre and in the state, against the A.G.P., as well as the failure of the National Front (non-Congress) government at the centre combined to cause the collapse of A.G.P. support in 1990.

Similarly, the subsequent collapse of the following Congress Party government, and the return to power of the A.G.P. in 1996, was primarily due to a revulsion against Hiteshwar Saikia's blatantly divisive policies in the state, rather than a positive endorsement of the A.G.P.. The A.G.P. victory demonstrated its adaptation into a party which could align itself to other parties, whose support derived from non-ethnic or alternative ethnic groups; the C.P.I., C.P.M., the Autonomous State Demand Council and the United Peoples Party of Assam, in the five party alliance opposing Congress rule.[1]

The death of Saikia, days before the 1996 election, was expected to provide an electoral boost to the Congress Party but in the event the A.G.P. became by far the largest party in Assam in both the Lok Sabha and the Legislative Assembly. Its integration into the United Front Government and its subsequent crackdown on the United Liberation Front of Assam (U.L.F.A.) suggest its development into a party more integrated with the mainstream of Indian political life, particularly in the

---

[1] Also important, in Assam as elsewhere in India, was the widespread disenchantment with the central government, stemming particularly from the numerous scandals which occurred.

manner in which this integration is based upon greater regionalism, rather than regionalism dealt with within the singular Congress Party.

The election of 1996 suggested to many commentators that a more clearly-defined recognition of Indian regionalism was occurring and, in this sense, India's unity may well be reinforced through a more positive recognition of difference. As Achin Vanaik argues;

> The United Front's coming to power at the Centre was taken as striking evidence that the regionalization of the Indian polity even at the national level is now a fact. (Vanaik 1997: 344)

6.1 The Development of the Assam Movement 1978-1985

One of the major arguments of this thesis is that the origins of the contemporary Assam Movement can be traced historically from the latter stages of British rule. The political events after 1978 can be seen as the final outcome of these previous developments. Although the move into an overtly political arena is on the one hand a continuation of what had preceded, on the other hand it reflects the complete failure of non-political actions to succeed and a resulting need to move into a different, more overt, forum.

The ability of Assamese elites, and their desire, to present everyday events in an ethnic/cultural light, demonstrates the changing power structure within the state of Assam. During the period of Congress hegemony from Independence until the Emergency of 1975-1977, indigenous non-Congress elites had neither the opportunity nor the ability to affect public perceptions in such a manner. Despite occasional Assamese dominance

of the Congress Party, more chauvinistic policies could not be implemented.

During the Emergency, Hussain argues that the All Assam Students Union (A.A.S.U.) underwent; "an internal transformation from left of the centre to right of the centre" (1993: 108), as many of the earlier activists left to join the Students' Federation of India which opposed the imposition of the Emergency. Membership of the A.A.S.U. is self-selecting, with non-Assamese students generally joining rival organizations, so that the relationship between the A.A.S.U. and Assamese cultural organizations has always been close.

Hussain attributes the changed stance of A.A.S.U. to a need to gain support from the Asamiya bourgeoisie and press which was not forthcoming given the previous leftist stance (Hussain 1993: 108). Hussain's interpretation ignores the previous role played in all post-Independence language controversies by A.A.S.U., and the correlation between the Assamese elite and A.A.S.U. activists, both of which were attempting to regain the position lost in the early 1970's as Other Backward Caste interests took control of the state Congress Party. This, accompanied by the splitting of Meghalaya, Manipur, Tripura, and Mizoram into states and union territories separate from Assam, had alienated many upper-caste Assamese throughout the early 1970's.

The ending of the Emergency and the coming to power of the Janata government, the splitting of Congress in 1978, as well as the recent formation of the parochial political parties (see section 5.5), provided a further impetus for these developments.

The consolidation of the C.P.I.(M) in universities, rural areas and tea gardens was such that, during the elections of March 1978, it won eleven seats, allegedly with the help of "foreigners' votes", despite polling only 6% of the vote (B.P. Singh 1996: 79). Throughout Assam, 28 seats in the Legislative Assembly were held by the Muslim block (Darnell and Parikh 1988: 273). For the first time since Independence a non-Congress group, the Janata Party, controlled the Legislative Assembly in Assam, securing 53 seats with 28% of the vote (B.P. Singh 1996: 79) in alliance with the Plains Tribal Council of Assam and the *Ujani Assam Rajya Parishad* (Dubey 1980: 64). Congress (I) Party support collapsed to 24%, and only 26 seats.[2] The Janata Dal utilized the issue of illegal immigration in an attempt to expose the corruption of the previous Congress Party government (see Section 5.3). Moraji Desai made statements in August, October and November 1978 which;

> hinted at stern measures against the infiltrators and even issued directives to the Borbora government to speed up the deportation of foreigners. (E.P.W. 8 December 1979)

Furthermore, in October 1978, the Chief Election Commissioner, S.L. Shakdher, told a conference of Chief Electoral Officers that;

> The influx has become a regular feature. I think that it may not be a wrong assessment to make on the basis of this increase of 34.95% between the two censuses, that the increase that is likely to be recorded in the 1991 census would be more than 100% over the 1961 census. In other words, a stage would

---

[2] Although the split in Congress aided this. The remaining Congress Party gained 9% of the vote and 8 seats.

> be reached when the state may have to reckon with the foreign nationals who may in all probability constitute a sizeable percentage, if not the majority population, in the state. (Limaye 1987: 330)

It is often noted that in 1931, the Census Superintendent, C.S. Mullan, wrote[3];

> Wheresoever the carcass, there vultures be gathered together. Where there is wasteland thither flock the Mymensinghias. In fact the way in which they have seized upon the vacant areas in the Assam Valley seems almost uncanny. (Census Report 1931: 51)

He continued that it seemed likely that within thirty years Sibsagar would be the only district of Assam in which the Assamese would feel at home (Census of India 1951: 73).

These quotes have become a standard fare in discussions of Assamese insecurity, suggesting an inevitability of cultural assimilation into a greater Bengal, as well as providing external support for the Assamese cause.[4] This fear is echoed in many regions where a particular community fears take-over by another, who have a higher birth-rate.[5] Although the situation in Assam is slightly different, the idea of a culture at threat is commonplace.

---

[3] For example, similar quotes are cited by J. Singh (1984: 1060), Chaudhuri (1982: 37), A. Guha (1988: 212), Hussain (1993: 206), A.A.S.U. (1980 memorandum to the Prime Minister).

[4] Along with *Sons of the Soil* by Myron Weiner, Monirul Hussain describes the quotes by Shakdher and Mullan as "the three most sacred certificates to the cause of the movement" (Hussain 1993: 103).

[5] For example, Protestants in Northern Ireland and "ethnic" Russians in the U.S.S.R. have made such a claim against Catholics and central Asian Muslims respectively.

The Gopinath Bardoloi Cup and the publication of research by Bose (see section 3.2), were amongst the earliest manifestations of the articulation of Assamese resentment to "foreign" domination.

It has already been noted (see section 3.3) that, despite the close links between Ahom and Assam, the Ahoms themselves were not an important part of the contemporary Assam Movement. Caste Hindu Assamese used the Ahom name and history to consolidate support amongst other caste Hindus, whilst the Ahoms themselves were peripheral, at most, to the movement.

Simultaneously, other events in 1978 helped mobilize a wider section of the Assamese community but equally reflected the depths of the preceding communalization. A commission was appointed to examine the employment policy of the Assam Oil Company at Digboi (Dubey 1980: 65). There was a clash between Bengalis and Mizos in "the Union Territory and Silchar" (Dubey 1980: 65). Finally, a union conference venue, in Guwahati, was named after B.N. Ghosh, a prominent Bengali "trade unionist of all-India stature" (A. Guha 1980: 1706).

Again, the portrayal of these events as ethnically motivated demonstrated the power of the Assamese elite. All political events were judged in terms of an ethnic relationship, in the same manner as the British colonial rulers had justified their rule as necessary because of the various "races" being intrinsically opposed.

The Marxist contention, articulated most vociferously by Amalendu Guha, maintains that this situation was brought about by the control of the press by the "Asamiya bourgeoisie since 1978" (Guha 1988:

1706). Guha argues that the bourgeoisie's fear of economic stagnation, due to pressure from above and below, and the growth in organized labour, encouraged the consolidation of an Assamese identity to act against Bengali and other competitors, particularly trades unions, the majority of which were Bengali dominated, and to secure control of the state apparatus to ensure this.

Although this thesis agrees, in so far as accepting that the Assamese identity is constructed for political ends, Guha's argument raises both theoretical and practical considerations. This was written in 1980 and not after the events of 1983 but it seems unrealistic to conceive that an identity can be articulated so vociferously from 1978, as Guha claims, such that by 1983, indeed by 1979, the cultural cleavages were so deep. The notion of being Assamese clearly existed previous to the exploitation of the Assamese media in the late 1970's and the consequent "fear psychosis" (Guha 1980: 1710) developed from a much longer-term period of socialization. It was the ability of elites to voice their concerns, rather than a conscious decision to begin the Assam Movement, that led to these developments occurring in this period.

The second criticism of Guha's approach is that the Assamese middle class was vastly out-numbered by other ethnic groups in their control of the economy long before 1978. That Assamese language newspapers have played a vital part in the Movement is certain and was demonstrated in the ability of *Asomiya Pratidin*[6], in

---

[6] The most popular Assamese vernacular daily newspaper.

particular, to establish an anti-Congress swing in the 1996 elections, allowing the five party alliance to triumph. However, to argue that the Assamese wanted to expel the Bengalis in 1978, to consolidate their position, ignores the fact that in almost all economic fields they were already in second place to migrants. Furthermore, many trades unions actually endorsed the aims of the Assam Movement.

The idea that culture is in some sense floating above the superstructure of economic relationships implies a major level of gullibility of the Assamese (see also section 1.1). Identity creation is an evolutionary process and it is agreed that were the economic difficulties not prevalent, the purpose of articulating an Assamese identity would be diminished. But Guha's position ignores the manner in which individual Assamese are aware that they are Assamese and that this implies that they should act in a certain way. This notion was clearly evolving and developing for decades before 1978.

Many commentators ignore the previous events in an attempt to explain the entire Movement as one of opposition to Muslim immigration. Jaswant Singh, a B.J.P. M.P., argues that the immediate cause of the Assam Movement was the bye-election in the Mangaldoi constituency of the Darrang district (J. Singh 1984: 1062). Other writers have similarly stressed the anti-Muslim basis for the Movement and attributed this to *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (R.S.S.) involvement (e.g. Rafiabadi 1988). The failure of the B.J.P. electorally suggests that the R.S.S., as well as Congress (I) activists, attempted to lead the Movement from the late

1970's and articulated similar postures to the Movement but that they were less cause than consequence of the Assam Movement (Gohain 1985: 21).

The death of the Hiralal Patwari, M.L.S. for Mangaldoi, Hiralal Patwari, in March 1979, led to a revision of the electoral rolls by the Electoral Commission. Objections were raised against 70,000 voters, out of the 600,000 on the voting list. The resulting tribunal appointed by the state government upheld 45,000 complaints (Limaye 1987: 330).

That scrutiny of the voting lists showed that 8% of the names were foreigners was perceived as particularly disturbing in a district which had not been assumed to have a high immigrant population. Yet this was only the final spark to the growing tension, highlighted above.

The bye-election in Mangaldoi could not be held due to protests over the electoral rolls, which followed both the Election Commissioner's report and further reports of large scale immigration into Assam from Bangladesh (S. Baruah 1986: 1192). Instead the election was postponed to the following mid-term election. Furthermore, the fact that two Muslim ministers, Zahirul Islam and A.F. Golam Osmani, objected to the deletion of names suggested, and was portrayed as, a conspiracy amongst Muslims to support *their* community.

On June 8 1979, the A.A.S.U. sponsored a twelve hour *bandh*, or general strike, to demand the "detection, disenfranchisement and deportation" (S. Baruah 1986: 1192) of foreigners. The Independence Day celebrations were boycotted throughout Assam (Das 1982: 65) and on 26-27 August 1979 the *All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad*

(A.A.G.S.P.) was formed in Dibrugarh to coordinate a state-wide movement against immigration.

The Assam Movement, the A.A.G.S.P., comprised the A.A.S.U., the P.L.P., the *Assam Yuvak Samaj* and cultural movements such as the A.S.S..[7] It also had outside support from trade union movements within the state (Das 1982: 66) and even the All India Sikh Students Federation (Hazarika 1995: 139). Later in 1979, the *Assam Jatiyatabadi Dal* (A.J.D.), Plains Tribal Council (Progressive) and the All Assam Tribal Sangha joined. After its formation;

> An unprecedented mass popular upsurge followed in the form of sit-ins, picketings in front of government offices, strikes and symbolic disobedience of the law. (S. Baruah 1986: 1192)

As the Janata government collapsed in New Delhi, mid-term elections were planned throughout India in

---

[7] The A.S.S. support of the Assam Movement eventually led to Saikia's government withdrawing its government funding due to its participation in "political", rather than "cultural", activities. This forced the A.S.S. down a more extreme path than many of its members would have preferred (Misra 1984b: 623). In August 1984, the A.S.S. responded with a resolution claiming that;

> The Asam Sahitya Sabha has throughout been working to promote the cause of the Assamese language, literature and culture as well as the Assamese national interest and shall continue to do so. Though the Sabha has been extending its support and cooperation to any movement built upon the basis of democratic, non-violent, non-communal, legal and non-political background in the interest of Assam, the Sabha has maintained its independent character with dignity and as such the question of the Sabha acting according to the direction of any party, any organisation or any individual simply does not arise. (I. Barua 1990: 129)

December 1979. Protests from the Congress (I) Party and the C.P.I.(M) reversed earlier decisions to delete the names of foreigners. The Government of Assam issued a statement on 18 September 1979 announcing that;

> The [Electoral] Commission has instructed that no person whose name was included in the electoral rolls should be eliminated on the grounds of citizenship as the process of establishing citizenship is time-consuming. The Commission further advised scrutiny of electoral rolls after the election is over. (Government of Assam: Press Note 88: 18 September 1979)

The eventual reversing of this position (discussed in the following section) was one of the most important contributory factors to the signing of the Assam Accord.

Just as the Assam Movement argued that political parties were irrelevant to politics in Assam, the Indian Government put much weight on the value of governmental institutions, particularly the 1980 Lok Sabha elections and the infamous 1983 Legislative Assembly elections.

In the 1980 parliamentary elections polling was prevented in twelve of the fourteen seats, these seats remaining unfilled until 1983. Nomination papers could only be filed in immigrant dominated Cachar, the two districts of which were easily won by Congress (I) Party. The official celebrations on Republic Day, 26 January 1980, were boycotted in favour of alternative A.A.S.U. programmes, despite the introduction of President's Rule on 12 December 1979.

Between 1980 and 1982 there were 23 negotiating sessions between the central government and the leaders of the Assam Movement, bypassing the state government. The first session began on 17 January 1980, just three days after Indira Gandhi's return to office. This haste

was primarily due to an oil blockade which had begun on 27 December 1979. Towards the end of 1982, a partial agreement was reached over the status of illegal immigrants. Those who arrived after 1971 were to be deported, whilst those who came between 1951 and 1961 were to be given Indian citizenship. The status of those who arrived between 1961 and 1971, thought to number approximately 960,000 (Far Eastern Economic Review 3 February 1983), was still undecided (S. Baruah 1986: 1192). Yet what agreements had been reached, were ignored during the following 1983 elections.

Party political events in Assam were, to say the least, turbulent. The Janata Ministry led by Golap Borbora collapsed in September 1979. A makeshift coalition, comprised of factions of the Janata Party, lasted until December 1979 when President's Rule was imposed. In December 1980, a Congress (I) Party government, led by Anwara Taimur, came to power. Formed through defections to Congress from other parties, this government fell in June 1981, when President's Rule was again imposed.

In January 1982, another Congress ministry, led by Keshab Gogoi, was established. This collapsed in March when President's Rule was yet again introduced and the Legislative Assembly dissolved. The Constitution did not allow for President's Rule to be extended beyond a year, which therefore meant that elections would have to take place by March 1983, unless the constitution itself were to be amended.

However, many commentators argued, before March, that the situation in Assam was such that elections

should not have been held due to the inability of guaranteeing that they would be "free and fair", another constitutional requirement (e.g. E.P.W. 29 January 1983). However, at the time, just six years after the Emergency, the impression of the centre so blatantly imposing its rule on states was thought to be unacceptable. Indira Gandhi argued that the elections were irrelevant to the violence;

> There is no group, or part of India, that does not have special demands. Can any group, no matter what their demands, dictate how the process of governing should be carried out? The election was part of our democratic functioning. I do not know whether we would have avoided this violence had we not had elections. There would have been large-scale violence anyway. (The Times 26 February 1983)

The E.P.W. opposed the elections, to be held on the basis of constitutional necessity, since the same provisions had been overlooked during the previous imposition of President's Rule;

> The Indian Constitution is a very pliable, even serviceable, document; and the application of its provisions has been even more pliable in the service of the party in power at the Centre. (E.P.W. 29 January 1983)

However, the Assam Movement's attempts to play down the relevance of party politics in favour of ethnic attachments in general meant that the political wrangling was seen as affecting an individual's ethnic self-perception.

Indeed, it is commonly believed that Congress leaders in Assam between 1980 and 1982 were chosen for their ethnic background, in an attempt to destabilize the Assamese "coalition". Anwara Taimur, for example, came from a "heavily East Bengali immigrant constituency and

was seen as a representative of immigrant interests" (S. Baruah 1986: 1192). Through a combination of repression and claims that the Assam Movement had lost its popular base, she gave the impression that the foreigners' issue had been ignored. Keshab Gogoi was thought to have been chosen for his Ahom origin (see section 3.3).

The Congress (I) Party's attempts to maintain the importance of electoral politics was overshadowed by their efforts to ensure that the outcome was a Congress state government. Gogoi, for example, claimed 63 supporters in the Legislative Assembly, whilst the Left and Democratic Front claimed 68. The choice of Gogoi as Chief Minister gave the impression that the Governor was maintaining Congress rule at the expense of any democratic mandate.

The Legislative Assembly election of 1983 was fought on the basis of the electoral rolls of 1978. The voting list therefore ignored any agreements made in the recent negotiations over the status of immigrants; post-1971 immigrants were still on the roll, whilst anyone who had come of age in the preceding four years was excluded. The Assam Movement called for a boycott of the elections, whilst Congress elites expected east Bengali immigrants to show their appreciation of the centre by supporting them. Any ethnic accommodation that had previously existed, or was in the process of being constructed, was completely ignored.

The violence of these elections occurred mainly in those constituencies containing a mixture of groups which supported and opposed the election. Where most either voted or did not vote the election was relatively calm.

In constituencies containing a mixture of "ethnic" groups, "violent confrontations took place" (S. Baruah 1986: 1199). The most interesting point, for this thesis, is how groups which would provisionally be called part of the Assamese ethnic coalition, turned on each other, demonstrating the failure of elites to convince certain groups that support of the Assam Movement, and thus membership of the Assamese community, would benefit them. This outcome can be attributed to a policy of divide and rule by the Congress (I) Party, both at the centre and more blatantly within Assam, and to an unjustified assumption by Assamese elites that, for example, plains tribals would support their agenda on the basis of previous inter-group relationships.

The constitutional privileges to certain groups encouraged the consolidation of these groups as distinct, definable and stigmatized. The inequitable economic situation between groups (Dutta Barua 1983b), both cause and consequence of cultural difference, resulted in large-scale violence.[8]

The 1983 election resulted in a two-thirds majority for the Congress (I) Party, which won 90 seats. Hiteshwar Saikia, an indigenous Assamese, formed a cabinet which included three Muslims and two tribals. The turn-out in

---

[8] Despite over 40 battalions of paramilitary forces being deployed to assist the police, estimates of the numbers killed vary between 3000 (S. Baruah 1986: 1184) and over 7,000 (Hussain 1993: 10) including the massacre at Nellie which resulted in 1,383 Bengali Muslim immigrants being killed (S. Baruah 1986: 1200) by Lalung tribals, allegedly with the support of the R.S.S. (for example, The Guardian 29 March 1983).

the election was 10% and, out of 126 seats, voting was cancelled in 18 seats whilst 4 were uncontested[9].

Within two weeks of the election, martial law was declared throughout the Brahmaputra Valley and a fortnight later Saikia announced that all post-1971 immigrants would be expelled. At the end of March, the A.A.S.U. called off its campaign against immigration, as moderates in the organization wished to assess the scale of violence of the past two months. Those Assamese peasants who had suffered during the violence refused to follow the lead of the A.A.S.U. and subaltern Assamese groups began to arm themselves. It has been in rural villages where the U.L.F.A. has had most support ever since.

After the events of early 1983, the central and the local Congress (I) Party attempted to implement certain populist measures to try and take away support for the Assam Movement. For example, the spelling of the major city in the north-east was changed from the anglicized Gauhati to the more Assamese Guwahati (S. Baruah 1987: 1203). In July 1983 a proposal was made to build a 180 mile wall between Assam and Bangladesh. Work was started on the wall in 1984, but had to be stopped when Bangladeshi border guards fired on the Indian workers.[10]

---

[9] In some heavily Assamese constituencies polling was as low as 269 voters in Dharampur (0.38%), 360 voters in Dhemaji (0.40%) and 440 in Bihpuria (0.69%). In larger cities, such as Jorhat, Sibsagar and Guwahati East less than 2% voted (J. Singh 1984: 1067).

[10] The falseness of the promises made was demonstrated to many during the erection of the fence, stretching 100 kilometres from the junction of West Bengal, Bangladesh and Assam to Dhubri in Assam. Work would take four or

Combined with these measures, Saikia attempted to break down the coalition behind the Assam Movement. The Bodo Sahitya Sabha was feted as an alternative to the A.S.S. whose funding was withdrawn. Despite this, support remained strong and, through strikes and boycotts of "official" government events, the Assam Movement disputed the legitimacy of Saikia's government. Rajiv Gandhi's election resulted in a more concessionary approach to the movement and the re-establishment of talks in April 1984.

6.2 The Assam Accord and the *Asom Gana Parishad* 1985-1997

The failure of non-"ethnic" institutions to survive led the government to back down in 1985 with the Assam Accord (see Appendix D). Immigrants who entered Assam between January 1 1966 and March 25 1971 (the date the state of Bangladesh was proclaimed) were to be disenfranchised for ten years but would enjoy all other rights of citizenship, requiring a change to Indian citizenship laws. Those who arrived after this date would be deported. "Immediate and practical steps" were to be taken to achieve these ends.

Proof of citizenship was to be based upon three types of document only;

(1) entry of name in 1971 or pre-1971 rolls,
(2) copies of National Register of Citizens,
(3) Citizenship certificates and Certificates of date of birth. (Choudhury 1985: 2146)

However, of the 1971 electoral rolls, the state could produce rolls in only 77 out of 126 constituencies,

---

five months but commenced just before the monsoon, when work would have to stop! (E.P.W. 28 April 1984) Furthermore, many thought it futile to build a fence between Assam and Bangladesh, when both share borders with Tripura, West Bengal, Meghalaya and Mizoram.

primarily due to the intransigence of pro-A.A.S.U. electoral officers, who disbelieved the validity of the electoral register as a true guide to citizenship. Thus, to prove citizenship in 1971 required citizenship to be proved much earlier. The N.R.C. had been declared invalid by Guwahati High Court in 1967 (see section 5.2), whilst the requirement for citizenship and birth certificates ignored the "social realities" (Choudhury 1985: 2147) of India.

Furthermore, the 1983 Legislative Assembly was to be dissolved and a caretaker government, run by Congress Chief Minister Hiteshwar Saikia, was introduced until the forthcoming elections. A security fence was to be built by the border with Bangladesh, after the previous attempt had been called off (see above). Finally, "constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards" were promised to "protect the cultural, social and linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people."

The signing of the Assam Accord demonstrates perhaps the naivety of both Rajiv Gandhi and the leaders of the Assam Movement. Gandhi's tendency to grant concessions to groups, signing accords in the Punjab and Mizoram, as well as Assam, and negotiating a deal with the National Conference in Jammu and Kashmir, resulted in other groups demonstrating; "their nuisance value in the hope that they too would be "bought off" with concessions" (Nugent 1990: 109).

Furthermore, it encouraged an atmosphere in which political or economic demands were seen to be fulfilled through cultural group membership. The signing of the

Assam Accord encouraged greater agitation by Bodo militants, demanding separation from Assam. The "farcical" Bodo Accord (Hazarika 1995: 161), signed in 1993, similarly resulted in strengthening the position of more extreme elements, in this case the Bodo Security force, since the Accord was, yet again, impossible to implement. The failure of the Assam Accord similarly, heightened support for the U.L.F.A., whose leaders claimed it demonstrated both the immaturity of the leaders of the Assam Movement and the deviousness of the central government.

After the signing of the Assam Accord, events followed a somewhat predictable course. The Accord was interpreted differently by the Assamese and the central government. Aroop Bordoloi, one of the Assamese leaders who had signed the Accord, reported that it meant that about 2.6 million people were to be deported (Intentional Herald Tribune 19 August 1985). The centre, citing "international obligations", forecast a much lower figure.

The A.G.P., founded in Golaghat on 5 October 1985 (B.P. Singh 1996: 189) by the leaders of the Assam Movement, won a landslide victory in the elections of December 1985. They won 64 out of 126 seats in the Legislative Assembly and half of the Lok Sabha seats. The average age of their M.L.A.s was around thirty (Nugent 1990: 106).

The A.G.P. message "minorities are not foreigners", gained support not only from the indigenous Assamese but also from plains tribals and tea plantation workers, who had traditionally supported the Congress Party. Assamese

Muslims were well represented on the A.G.P. list of candidates (Baruah 1987: 1205) and despite an occasional anti-Muslim bias to the Assam Movement, this community generally supported the A.G.P. More surprisingly, in some areas Bengali Muslims and Hindus supported the A.G.P.; Nowgong, for example, returned an A.G.P. candidate. In part, as with the tribals and tea workers, this was intended to consolidate their position through supporting the victorious party. Furthermore, the position of many Bengali Muslims within the Indian state, that is, those who arrived before 1966, would be legitimated by the implementation of the Assam Accord.[11]

Again, as with the P.L.P., the A.G.P. attempted to predicate its legitimacy upon an inclusive community, based upon territory and language, rather than on notions of cultural separateness. Yet, although not explicitly stated in, for example, the aims of the A.G.P. (see Appendix E, particularly points 11 and 16), it is clear that Bengalis supporting the A.G.P. can only be in the Assamese community, as defined by the A.G.P., upon renouncing previous cultural affiliations.

This point is reiterated in works written by the founder organizations of the A.G.P., in particular, the A.A.S.U. and the A.A.G.S.P.. Although generally

---

[11] Despite support for the A.G.P. being received from Bengali Hindus, Assamese Muslims (the Na-Asamiya) and low caste Assamese Hindus and Scheduled Tribes, the first two groups received no representation in the government. Although there were only six Assamese Brahmins in the State Assembly, five became cabinet ministers. Similarly, eighteen out of twenty-one high caste Assamese in the Assembly became ministers. Out of twenty-one Scheduled Tribals, only four became ministers.

attempting to place immigration into Assam in the context of India-wide "infiltration", it is clear, and discussions with activists confirm, that this is more to place the Assam Movement's grievances within the hegemonic secular and liberal discourse, rather than to argue that massive immigration is occurring throughout the Indian state.

The United Minorities Front (U.M.F.), formed in Hojai, Nowgong, on 10 November 1985 by disaffected Bengali politicians who split from Congress (I), opposed the implementation of the Accord but electorally trailed third after the A.G.P. and the Congress (I) Party. Unlike the A.G.P., it was only able to gain support from a much smaller (Bengali Muslim) power-base.

One of the new government's first acts was to establish a Department of Assam Accord Implementation. The central government amended the Citizenship Act in an attempt to reassure minorities within Assam, a measure claimed by the A.G.P. to violate the Assam Accord. The difficulties of implementing the clauses of the Assam Accord relating to foreigners (see also section 5.1) coupled with the high hopes of their supporters, led Prafulla Mahanta, the A.G.P. Chief Minister, to state; "It is so tough, tougher than we had thought. People want us to do much, much more than we can do" (India Today 15 March 1986).

The Lok Sabha elections of 1989 were postponed as revised voting lists were still not available. Neither had immigrants been expelled. Nugent asks; "Was this another example of an unimplementable accord, or one

which was never intended to be implemented?" (Nugent 1990: 107)

By 1990, the relationship between the A.A.S.U., the A.G.P. and the U.L.F.A. was becoming confused. Although the A.G.P. attempted to present a more moderate stance, the controlling interest of the more extreme A.A.S.U. and U.L.F.A. led to confusion. Samir Das asserts that the problems of the A.A.S.U. were that to maintain a separate identity for itself it had to ensure a difficult balance between the A.G.P. and the U.L.F.A.. To ensure distinctiveness from the two, criticism of the failing A.G.P.[12] and non-endorsement of the U.L.F.A. were essential. Despite the aims of the U.L.F.A. being closer to the A.A.S.U., the latter attempted to "take the wind away from U.L.F.A.'s sail" (S.K. Das 1994: 43). In popular perception however, these wranglings were disbelieved and the three organizations were assumed to work closely together. The Congress Party allege that the Assam Governor, in a report to the President of India, stated that;

> ... the loss of faith in efficiency and the credibility of the government apparatus is so great that the thin distinction between U.L.F.A., A.A.S.U. and A.G.P., which existed at some stage, stands totally obliterated. (Quoted in Congress Party Manifesto 1996: 5)

During the first five years of A.G.P. rule, little was done to implement the Assam Accord, partly due to the lack of direction of the government, but more to do with attempts by the centre to block the main feature of the

---

[12] Creating a logistical problem for the A.G.P. since most of its activists were A.A.S.U. cadres.

Accord, that relating to immigration, due to international pressure from Bangladesh. Although the A.G.P. joined the Janata Dal government at the centre in 1989, a series of scandals, particularly the on-going feud between the more moderate Prafulla Mahanta and more extreme Brighu Kumar Phukan, the Home Minister, led to the imposition of President's Rule in the state towards the end of 1990.

During the last years of A.G.P. rule, despite Phukan's two threats of resignation, after being accused of being in league with the U.L.F.A. by Mahanta, it was he, rather than the Chief Minister, who was perceived to be effectively in control of the A.G.P.. In 1990 Phukan formed his own party, the *Nutan Asom Gana Parishad* (New Assam Public Council)(N.A.G.P.).[13] Other scandals emerged towards the end of the A.G.P. term.[14]

---

[13] The N.A.G.P. contested the election of 1991 separate from the A.G.P. and this split vote allowed the Congress Party to win the Lok Sabha seat of Guwahati (V.B. Singh 1994: 76). The N.A.G.P. rejoined the A.G.P. before the 1996 elections. Phukan was expelled from the A.G.P. in 1997 for alleged anti-party activities.

[14] "Other ministers have been involved in graft, drunken misbehaviour with foreign tourists and their lone female colleague in the Cabinet" (India Today 15 September 1990).

> In one [scandal] the associates of a minister attacked a passenger on an Indian Airlines flight for failing to surrender his seat to the pompous politician." The "state-fed" scandal involved a group of contractors gaining $600,000 for supplying foodgrains which, when delivered, were rotten. The investigating officer was "led aside by the Chief Minister and told, essentially, to keep quiet. "The money is for the boys" he was told. (Hazarika 1995: 184)

The U.L.F.A. secessionist campaign, involving kidnappings and extortion, led to Operation Bajrang, a centrally imposed military campaign. This involved, at first, five brigades of the Indian Army and aimed to destroy U.L.F.A.'s military capability in the Brahmaputra Valley.

Towards the end of 1990, President's Rule was again reimposed; the A.G.P. accused the centre of attempting to impose Congress (I) Party rule on the state through use of the army. Evidence was gathered of human rights atrocities being performed by the army (India Today 31 March 1991). The U.L.F.A. continued its campaign of intimidation, for example, on 22 February 1991, killing Manabendra Sarma, the General Secretary of the Assam Pradesh Congress (I) Committee. That said, some developmental schemes were launched and D.D. Thakur, the Governor of Assam, appeared to be making headway towards a negotiated settlement with the U.L.F.A.. The removal of Thakur, because he had agreed to talk to the U.L.F.A. leaders and guarantee them safe passage, led to the imposition of Loknath Mishra, a veteran politician from Orissa, as Governor. President's Rule was extended beyond May 27, when it was originally planned to end.

The A.G.P. failure led to Congress victory in the elections of 1991. The choice of Hiteshwar Saikia as Chief Minister had two effects. On the one hand his policies, coupled with his liberal use of the army, created some level of economic stability, particularly for the immigrant business communities. On the other

hand, this economic stability was at the expense of any political accommodation and the divisiveness of his policies consolidated a caste Assamese identity further. The ineffectiveness of many of Saikia's policies, particularly towards the popular Autonomous State Demands Council (A.S.D.C.),[15] galvanized opposition towards the Congress Party from more quarters.

Saikia attempted to use the Surrendered U.L.F.A. (S.U.L.F.A.) to turn against the remaining U.L.F.A. members, as well as the A.S.D.C. and other political organizations. This followed the previous attempt of the A.A.S.U. leadership to use the U.L.F.A. as a leverage against the centre.[16] Both attempts failed and led to a situation in which a culture of violence, as well as a massive arsenal of weapons, existed throughout much of the state. Both the U.L.F.A. and the S.U.L.F.A. demanded protection money and the tea industry in particular

---

[15] Saikia dissolved the autonomous council of this nationalist, Marxist party and later promised an upgrade for Karbi Anglong from autonomous district to an autonomous territory, if it withdrew its demand for an autonomous state, as was guaranteed in the Sixth Schedule. Mass protests followed and Saikia reverted to the previous situation. The autonomous state itself was achieved in 1996 (Bhattacharya 1993: 1785). This accommodation from the Congress Party towards the A.S.D.C. can be explained due to the anti-Assameseness of their policies and their "useful" links with the C.P.I.(M).

[16] Along with U.L.F.A and S.U.L.F.A., the rise of D.U.L.F.A. - duplicate U.L.F.A. - has been reported. The D.U.L.F.A. members have cashed in on the inability of companies to distinguish between the two "official" organizations but risk "elimination" by the U.L.F.A. (Telegraph 16 June 1996).

suffered, its executives working in more remote areas of Upper Assam.

The apparent triumph of the moderate Mahanta over the more extreme Phukan enabled the five party alliance to contest the elections of 1996 united against the Congress (I) Party. That the A.G.P. did not expect such success in the elections is demonstrated by the fact that they did not nominate candidates for election in all constituencies, as they had in 1985.

The primary cause of the victory was accepted by most to be a dislike of Congress, rather than an endorsement of the previous A.G.P. administration. The A.G.P. again gained the support of the Muslim minority, taking the Congress Party's traditional role as protector of minority groups. On one level this reinforces the idea that minorities are more likely to support the dominant party (Rudolph and Rudolph 1987: 187). In the Assamese case, this, along with the failure of Congress (I) to rehabilitate around 20,000 Muslims made homeless by Bodo militants in 1993, provided the support for the A.G.P.. U.M.F. leader, Hafiz Rashid Ahmed Choudhury, claimed that;

> This was the main issue on which the Muslim minorities decided to vote for the A.G.P., thereby rupturing the traditional minority practice of supporting the Congress which failed to give protection to the minorities. (The Pioneer 19 March 1997)

A major role was played by the vernacular press, particularly *Asomiya Pratidin* which consistently

supported the A.G.P., and vociferously opposed Congress in the run up to the election.[17]

The Assamese press campaigned against both the alleged corruption of the Congress Party in the state and the role of the army, which was widely believed to have performed numerous atrocities. The fact that four senior government officials fled the state on the day that the A.G.P. formed the state government added to the salience of these claims.[18] The major concern with the centre was that the Assamese situation was treated as a law and order, rather than a political, problem. The Congress solution, the use of the army, was seen to exacerbate the problem.

The growing political maturity of the A.G.P., their full acceptance by the central government, with the post of Cabinet Minister for Steel and Mines going to Birendra Prasad Baishya, and their growing opposition to the U.L.F.A. suggest that the A.G.P. is now attempting to forge a new Assamese identity, similar to that attempted

---

[17] The editor of *Asomiya Pratidin*, Ajit Kumar Bhuyan, was arrested on 24 August 1997 and charged under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, the Explosive Substances Act and complicity in the murder of Sanjoy Ghosh, a social activist.

[18] One of the senior officials, Deputy Inspector General Ashim Roy, was amongst five senior police officers charged with a variety of crimes, including racketeering with S.U.L.F.A. activists and the murder of one S.U.L.F.A. activist who had allegedly refused to hand over the policemen's share of the extorted money. The extortion was said to fetch at least 100,000 Rupees a day. Other officials claimed that the five policemen were victimised for being non-Assamese (Hindustan Times 8 May 1997).

in the 1960's and 1970's. Rather than an exclusive caste-Hindu Assamese-speaking party, this reconstruction is aiming to create a more inclusive community of people who live in Assam and think of themselves as Assamese. The failure of the B.J.P. to achieve any political targets in Assam shows its inability to equate the immigration issue with an anti-Muslim one, although they were also hindered by the U.L.F.A. threat to execute any B.J.P. candidates in Assam, under the slogan "keep communalism out of the land of Shankardeva". This resulted in nearly all of the B.J.P. candidates taking refuge in safe houses in Guwahati.

Within Assam, the mandate given to the A.G.P. by the elections of 1996, is disputed. Instead the A.G.P. vote demonstrates to many an extreme loathing of Congress, as well as the ability of the U.L.F.A. cadres to ensure a high voting turn-out from rural areas.

In some senses the election of the A.G.P. to power in the Legislative Assembly in 1985 marks the "Moment of Arrival" (Chatterjee 1986: 131) for the Assam Movement. The Assamese cultural identity had secured enough support to be electorally viable. However, this increase in numerical support has inevitably led to a decline in intensity.

For any ethnic/nationalist identity the moment of achievement of either an independent state or greater freedom within a federal system marks the end of the stage in which cultural identity can be the only consolidating force. Attempts by parties attempting to represent the nation during an independence struggle, such as the Congress Party in India, will inevitably need

to adapt after achieving their nationalist goal to deal with different cleavages. The situation in Assam in 1985 was no different. The establishment of economic goals in the manifestos of 1985 gave the impression that the economy could be run in a manner beneficial for the Assamese ethnic group. The fact that outside constraints such as the Constitution and the entrenched power of non-Assamese interests in controlling the Assamese economy meant that these targets were unviable.

The failure of the A.G.P. to deliver any benefits of indigenous rule, coupled with their attempts to use the U.L.F.A. as a tool to prise more from the centre, led to a situation in which the U.L.F.A. vision of the future became more popular than that of the A.G.P., particularly with many subaltern rural Assamese. There is a general consensus amongst the urban Assamese middle class that the individual members of the U.L.F.A. have, like the leaders of the A.G.P., become steadily more interested in their own well-being than in that of the Assamese people.

6.3 The United Liberation Front of Assam

Although closely linked to the Assam Movement, and founded in response to the same grievances, unconstrained by constitutional requirements, the U.L.F.A. was able to articulate a separate notion of community, and a different response, to the Assam Movement.

Symbolically founded in the historic stadium of the Ahom kings (Bezbaruah 1997: 181) in Sibsagar on 7 April 1979 (S.K. Das 1994: 71), the U.L.F.A. criticized the economic backwardness of Assam through a pseudo-Marxist/nationalist perspective. The emphasis on "foreigners" by the Assam Movement was felt to be

tangential to the main problem, that of weak leadership by the Assamese middle class in response to non-Assamese colonialism. An independent Assamese state was held to be the only long-term solution to the problem of Indian colonialism.

Those who founded the U.L.F.A. included Arobindo Rajkhowa, who had previously led the *Asom Jatiyabad Chattra Yuva Parishad*, student wing of the A.J.D. (Hazarika 1995: 167). Dormant until the 1983 election, its leaders then discussed tactics with the Assam People Liberation Army, also founded in 1979. The two organizations merged in 1985.

That economic backwardness is felt to be an important cause of the need for the Assamese to protest is demonstrated by Bishnu Jhoti Burgohain, one of the founders of the U.L.F.A., who argues;

> All the Indian people have come here for business. Whatever money they make they send back to their own country. They treat Assam as an Indian colony. The indigenous people don't get anything. (B.B.C. Correspondent 19 April 1997)

The main targets of the U.L.F.A. have been non-Assamese businessmen, who have failed to adopt to Assamese "culture",[19] and politicians, in particular from the Congress Party, who are seen to have participated in "colonial" practices, in particular the "illegal" elections of 1983. Assamese businessmen, despite being opposed to the Marxist ideas of the U.L.F.A., have not

---

[19]The people from the Marwari community came to Assam long before Independence but even after forty-two years they did not learn the Assamese language, the Assamese culture and the Assamese philosophy of life (Babulal Moore, quoted in S.K. Das 1994: 74-75).

been targeted as they are seen to be sympathetic with the wider aims of the Assamese community. Many have benefitted from the outflow of non-Assamese businessmen in the light of the U.L.F.A.'s policies.

Whereas the A.G.P. had to reach an accommodation with the centre, the U.L.F.A. was able to demand, and enforce, those demands originally made by the Assam Movement, but which the A.G.P. in power was unable to deliver. Links between the two are clearly ambiguous but, in large part, the demands made by the U.L.F.A. are those with which the A.G.P. would agree, but which it cannot argue as forcefully. Despite the distinction between the two organizations, to most non-Assamese they are synonymous. Debabrata Sarma, Secretary of the United Reservationist Minority Council of Assam, founded in 1986, accused the U.L.F.A. of being an; "ultra-nationalist, militant stream of the Assam Movement" (Quoted in S.K. Das 1994: 77). Major military crackdowns on U.L.F.A., Operation Bajrang in 1990, and Operations Cloudburst and Rhino in 1991, have been enforced by Congress state governments, and the A.G.P. has appeared to be more lenient with its attitude towards the U.L.F.A.. The apparent attempted imposition of K.P.S. Gill, former hardline Director General of the Police in the Punjab, as an advisor to the Government of Assam resulted in senior A.G.P. officials pressurising Prafulla Mahanta to prevent this (Times of India 29 August 1997).

Operation Rhino severely dented the military capabilities of the U.L.F.A. and followed a period during which their "good works" in villages, building dams and repairing roads, for example, were legitimized by

attendances by; "wives of police officials, and in one case, the Deputy Commissioner" (Hazarika 1995: 175).

1990 proved to be the high point for the U.L.F.A.. As the A.G.P. government proved to be incapable of delivering the major promises of the Assam Accord, the deportation of foreigners, so the U.L.F.A. worked as an almost parallel government, at least in the Brahmaputra Valley and Upper Assam, with support from those members of the Assamese community which were more peripheral to the high-caste dominated A.G.P..

Although the U.L.F.A. remains important, particularly affecting the economy of the state through its extortion campaign targeting non-Assamese businessmen, in popular perception the moralistic overtones to its independence struggle are generally seen to be less than genuine (Hazarika 1995: 175). The opulent lifestyle of the U.L.F.A. "boys" was apparently revealed when those who accepted the government's offer of surrendering demanded substantial financial resources from the state and continued to extort money to supplement their incomes.

That said, the extortion that did occur, in the case of tea gardens estimates assume that in the early 1990's the larger gardens paid 2,000,000 Rupees (Hazarika 1995: 187), was generally supported as a measure to prevent money flowing out of the state. The election of the A.G.P. in 1996 was in part based upon a promise to end the conflict:

> The A.G.P. manifesto also has a commitment to confiscate all clandestine weapons within a period of three months and to bring down factional terrorism with an iron hand. (The Sentinel 26 June 1996)

The obvious problem for the A.G.P. was that, by cracking down on the U.L.F.A., attention was diverted from the core issue for which it had been elected; the implementation of the Assam Accord. Many non-Assamese had supported the A.G.P. on the assumption that because of the closer links of the A.G.P. to the U.L.F.A., a more peaceful settlement could be achieved than were a Congress government to be elected.

As the "Tata Tea Scandal" developed during 1997, it became clear that initial estimates of the size of protection money paid were vastly under-stated. In all, it was alleged that all of the militant outfits in the northeast were benefitting by 30,000,000 Rupees, with the U.L.F.A. alone receiving 15,000,000 Rupees from tea estates, oil drilling companies and oil refineries, including some which were government owned (Indian Express 12 September 1997). The resulting difficulty for the A.G.P. government is that a softer line towards the U.L.F.A. would appear to confirm widespread suspicions of the relationship between the two organizations. Taking a harder line would be unpopular amongst those members of the A.G.P. who value that relationship.

6.4 Assessment

This work has attempted to deconstruct the historical background which led to these events, focusing around identity as the unit of political mobilization. The historical developments discussed previously both caused a communal consciousness to develop and then reinforced it through political and economic institutions.

When this Assamese identity existed, that is, was recognized as a primary marker of self-identity, elites were able to manipulate this, sometimes consciously, sometimes not, for political purposes. However, the construction of the Assamese identity in opposition to other identities has in some senses inevitably led to the rise of the U.L.F.A.. The high-caste Assamese who lead the A.G.P. had to gain support from other groups to attempt to regain political supremacy within the state. Although they have achieved this political power, their failure to fulfil those policies which articulating an Assamese identity had been assumed to ensure, encouraged the development of more vociferous and chauvinistic versions of this identity.

Furthermore, as has been demonstrated, one of the most important external perceptions of the northeast has been its heterogeneity. Both unity and division have been enforced through this depiction, particularly as political structures have been established to perpetuate what was thought to be historical truth.

Thus the events of the 1980's were both a recognition of external influence and a manifestation of elite power, within the system which was externally created. Cultural artifacts which caused feelings of

division; both physical, such as *Satras*, and non-tangible, such as language, were reinforced by the Assam Movement through the articulation of Ahom myths. Pictures of Lachit Barphukan and the belief that the Assamese are more Thai than Indian, for example, were used to try to gain contemporary political ends through reference to historical ideals, despite the Ahoms emphasizing their difference from the Movement.

These feelings of difference were felt in relation to "foreigners"; strictly speaking Bengali Muslims, but as A.K. Das, a self professed Assamese patriot, claims;

> The Bengalee (sic) dominated Cachar district did not accept the movement against non-Indians since almost all foreigners are Bengalees. (Das 1982: 73)

Implying, though not explicitly stating, that all Bengalis are foreigners. Indeed, Das accepts that "assimilated" Bengalis joined the Assam Movement but, upon assimilating, they became less Bengali, and more Assamese.

The weakness of the Assamese is felt to be greater since their adversaries are themselves not a "martial race". The acceptance by both Bengalis and Assamese of British racial stereotypes demonstrates the pervasiveness of those ideas that empower one group in relation to another. The Assamese elite are quick to portray the Bengalis as non-martial, the Bengalis to portray the Assamese as indolent.

The economic disparity between the "indigenous" Assamese and the more prosperous immigrants, reflects this dichotomy. Those groups economically backward relative to the Assamese are "allowed" to join the coalition, hence tea planters and tribals are accepted as

Assamese. Bengali Muslims have, at times, been accepted, as neo-Assamese, *na-Asamiya*, but their numerical size, rather than their economic status, articulated particularly by the B.J.P., have made them the main threat to the Assamese. This also reflects the powerlessness of the Assamese elite to target Indian migrants, within the internal political structure, such that the more extreme elements, such as the U.L.F.A., are able to increase their support, through targeting non-Assamese businessmen and thereby achieving aims intended by the original movement, but which the constitutionally bound A.G.P. has been unable to deliver.

This inability to overcome the more obvious threat to Assamese culture has enabled a more extreme path to be taken by the U.L.F.A., targeting wealthy migrants, particularly tea planters, but equally Marwari and Bengali businessmen in Assam. The situation in Nagaland, where taxes are paid to parallel governments, is distant, but not far-fetched.

Constructed cultural differences aid an understanding of these processes. Notions of cultural difference, perceived by outsiders, based upon certain cultural markers, reinforced through political institutions and by relative economic backwardness, have caused a feeling of resentment which, if not managed, was always liable to cause ill-feeling towards immigrants. The change in Congress Party organization from the late 1960's allowed the explicit articulation of these notions, which increased in salience after state reorganization. These events resulted in an overlap of

elite and subaltern economic interests, which the articulation of cultural separateness could encourage.

The difficulty now is that the use of identity, constructing notions of being Assamese against being a (tautological) foreigner, is that politically the A.G.P. has articulated this against support of, in particular, the Congress (I), and the C.P.I.(M), due to their use of Bengali Muslim voters and derogatory marks made by Jyoti Basu, Chief Minister of West Bengal, at the start of the Assam Movement.[20] This has affected the possibility of political accommodation with either party, as was demonstrated in 1996, when the A.G.P refused to join any government at the centre in which the Congress (I) Party had any inside involvement.

Although cultural markers are manipulated, and identities constructed, this cannot occur instantly. Re-inventing a non-exclusionary northeastern identity cannot occur until the structural economic disparity with migrants is remedied. The disintegration of the colonial state of Assam into new states, union territories and autonomous districts, has reinforced a specific Assamese identity at the expense of a northeastern one and has failed to ally these localized identities to the Indian

---

[20] "He made snide remarks about Assamese women taking jam sandwiches and tea as if they were going on picnics, rather than Satyragraha." (A.K. Das 1982: 83) Amalendu Guha disputes this popular impression, claiming that Basu;

> expressed nothing but goodwill for the Assamese people and concern about what would happen if the West Bengal bound exodus were to attract serious proportions. (A. Guha 1980: 1707)

national identity because of the vast number of distinctive self-identifying parochial groups against which community membership has been constructed.

Conclusion

The Assamese case study has provided an example of how problems within an otherwise successful post-colonial state, India, can arise in peripheral regions in which the national identity has failed to replace and, through methods of governance, implicitly encouraged smaller-scale, localized identities. The ability of these identities to be articulated as a perceived method of resolving, primarily economic, problems has been argued to show less their primordiality than their instrumentalism in that they are perceived to be the most effective channels through which such imbalances can be remedied.

The utility of such identities owes much, as Chapter Four has demonstrated, to British rule. Equally important, however, has been the post-Independence emphasis on communities, as argued in Chapter Two. Once the belief that communitarian action will gain social goods is in place, the necessity to construct the community becomes paramount. Chapters Five and Six have demonstrated the specific events which have helped in the consolidation of an Assamese identity, whilst Chapter Three described the means by which historic myths have been utilized to define membership of the group.

One apparent implication of this work is that the attempted empowerment of localized identities (Subaltern Studies) is misplaced. However, it is not the intention to give pre-eminence to elite action and to suggest that subaltern individuals lack their own agency. Gramscian notions of hegemony and the importance of socialization provide essential assumptions for this thesis. Throughout

the study, Assamese elites are seen to have attempted to enforce particular conceptions of Assamese society onto the subaltern for their own benefit. However, not only do these elites act within and through a belief-system encouraged by India-wide elites but the success of the identities articulated has varied dependent upon the compatibility of the elite aims with those of subaltern groups.

The colonial perception that India was comprised of discrete communities resulted in the implementation of certain policies and attitudes, as argued by Said (1995) and Inden (1990). However, this study has supported more recent revisionist arguments (in particular, Bayly 1996) that these attitudes were neither all pervasive nor were they always unwillingly enforced onto colonial subjects. Bayly argues that the communal characterization of Indian society demonstrates the weakness, as much as the strength, of the colonial state (Bayly 1996: 370) and these ideas commonly derived from the prevailing pre-colonial attitudes. In the Assamese case, it is clear that an initial colonial misunderstanding of Assamese society resulted in the construction of a particular characterization of the Assamese people which empowered new elites particularly given the proximity to politically "wayward" Bengal. The subsequent utilization of certain colonial conceptions of Assamese society demonstrates not a lack of agency amongst indigenous elites but that these ideas provided a meaningful platform upon which to secure widespread support.

In the same manner as the beliefs underpinning colonial rule necessitated either acceptance or rejection

by native groups, so Assamese elites have either supported or opposed the assumptions of Indian leaders, in large part necessary to gain mass support. Hence, for example, when the Assam Movement began; "Most of the A.A.S.U./A.A.G.S.P. offices often had garlanded framed photographs of Gandhiji" (Hussain 1993: 139). Control of signs and symbols was vital but most of the signs and symbols towards which Assamese subaltern groups felt an affiliation were Indian symbols.

What then does this imply about the agency of the subaltern in Assam? Despite the thesis tracing the construction of a particular Assamese identity, and attributing the success of this identity to its assimilation into "mass consciousness", the thesis does not imply that individuals lack agency. Rather, it was in the interests of subaltern groups to articulate this particular Assamese identity in an attempt to secure control of social goods. Being Assamese and articulating this identity vociferously represents neither a primordial essence, the identity was relatively recently constructed, nor a false consciousness; being Assamese represented a much more coherent method by which to gain social goods than articulating an ideological position or membership of a particular social class.

The problem, however, of political actions being determined by identity and cultural affiliation is that identity politics is predicated on the assumption of division. That is, the existence of "us" implies and requires "them", against which the group can be contrasted and without which the existence of "us" is inconceivable and meaningless. It is impossible to be

Assamese without some characterizable and stigmatizable Other; Bengalis, Muslims, Marwaris and so forth. Thus, although being Assamese is positive for those individuals within this categorization, it is simultaneously negative in its connotations for relationships with non-Assamese.

Some generic points can be taken from the Assamese case to explain the "success" of cultural/ethnic organisation within the post-colonial world. The ability of colonial powers to divide societies along cultural lines derived in part from scientific assumptions that these divisions represented some primordial difference. Colonial categorization, reinforced by systems of governance, at times deepened existing differences and at other times created new divisions.

The post-colonial nation-building project attempted to reduce these differences but the colonial granting of rights to the leadership of certain groups ensured opposition to the imposition of a more egalitarian system. Ethnic sub-nationalist movements generally occurred in those societies in which the post-colonial elite were seen as representative of a different community during the period of colonial rule.

Why though do these movements articulate political demands through the language of cultural difference? The answer is clearly dependent upon the context but the pervasiveness of western nationalist discourse is clearly important. The belief that nationality is essential for individual fulfilment implies that anti-systemic protest requires the construction of new identities, replacing the official state-nationalism with localized, cultural sub-nationalisms.

In the Assamese case then, the argument of the thesis can be summarized in the following manner. A specific Assamese-speaking, Vaishnavite-Hindu elite, accustomed to political power within the state of Assam, found this control diminishing during the late 1960's and early 1970's. This occurred because of changes in the structure of the dominant Congress Party at national level and due to a reliance by some Congress activists in the state of Assam on the votes of illegal immigrants.

Regaining this political power required mass support, given the democratic framework. Utilizing distinctions conceived by the British, this elite articulated a conception of Assamese identity beneficial to themselves. It was not the first time that particular ideas, such as resistance to Moghul rule, were discussed but it was the most vociferous and "political" use of these images. Based upon cultural difference, particularly language and religion, drawing on historical ideas that defined the community and specified ways of acting and highlighting alternative conceptions of the Assamese by other groups, this identity was reinforced.

On its own however, this was not enough. The Assamese identity was only "successful" because of the integration of long-standing subaltern political demands into the characterization of the Assamese community. Thus, for example, the resentment of Assamese-speakers towards the land appropriation by Bengali-speaking Muslims became an essential feature of an Assamese identity. This was reinforced and given intellectual legitimacy through being placed within a historical

tradition which included various comments of colonial enumerators in the early twentieth century.

The events of the late 1970's which led to the Assam Movement, were only possible after this Assamese identity had permeated into both subaltern and elite consciousness. This is not because the events in themselves were implausible before but that their explanation in terms of ethnic conflict could not occur before the respective identities had become entrenched as the main explanatory political variables of the region.

A consistent Assamese critique of the Indian government's response to the situation in Assam throughout the 1980's and 1990's was to argue that it was treated as a "law and order", rather than a political, problem. In a similar vein, the criticism could be levelled at Assamese elites that they have explained "normal" events as representative of ethnic problems.

Contemporary interpretations of ethnic problems as signs of primordial identities perhaps result from the apparent similarity of events under colonial rule and after Independence. That the Assamese identity as conceptualized by colonial rulers and contemporary Assamese elites is completely different has been demonstrated in this thesis. Yet without the initial colonial classification, the contemporary use of the category would be impossible. The category, once established, clearly gains its own momentum and the development of the U.L.F.A. demonstrates how differing solutions can be presented to similar initial demands.

What then are the implications of this study with regard to the position of Assam within the Indian union?

The most important point of this thesis is that cultural categories can never be removed as potential markers for a political movement. In the first place, any religious or linguistic difference which exists is available to be used to create difference with another group. Only complete homogeneity, an impossibility, could remove this potential. The creation by colonial rule of a number of categories, some discrete, others over-lapping, provided divisions within which these cultural differences can be located. Particular problems can be "managed" successfully in the short-term, pro-actively, through grants perhaps, or reactively, through military force. In the long-term, however, as long as a structure exists in which the articulation of difference is rewarded, political demands may be made using the medium of cultural distinctiveness. If, for example, the contemporary demands of the Assamese were satisfied, this does not prevent another group, in a few generations time, making different demands on the basis of their Assameseness and, in all likelihood, incorporating the story of the Assam Movement into their use of myth. This group would not represent a reawakening of an Assamese identity; instead it would be a separate and discrete political movement.

Thus the only long-term solution is to create an environment which does not encourage the articulation of separate identities. If sub-national cultural identities are expressed, then the benefits of demonstrating the national identity must be seen to be greater than the localized identity. Clearly, to a large extent, this is theoretical. However, within the Indian state, the

emphasis on linguistic and religious division as a means of gaining social rights implies the opposite to this.

Control of signs and symbols is thus essential for the state to enforce its legitimacy. In the short-term however, there would be major difficulties in directly countering the myths articulated by the Assam Movement. Any attempt to emphasize the integral position of Assam within the Indian state would fail to reduce the importance of Assamese culture in the politics of Assam. Firstly, it would re-emphasize the importance of the Assamese as a group, through articulating myths regarding "their" role in all-Indian history. Secondly, attempts have been made to do this through, for example, the image of Assam as a microcosm of India as a whole. The problem though, when certain belief-systems have been established, is that Indian attempts to demonstrate the importance of Assam to India, merely highlights how different the Assamese are. Biharis, for example, are not continuously told how vital they are to the Indian state. There is no need.

Furthermore, attempts also failed because the salience of an Indian identity was too far removed from the realities of life in the northeast, as lived by many Assamese. Historically, the necessities for true integration; bridges, railways and so forth, were only achieved through long struggles. The articulation of myth is only a useful political device when it reflects some part of an individual's everyday existence and does not just appear to be abstracted rhetoric. Locating Assam within the Indian mainstream will be disbelieved if social and economic realities counter the claims.

However, in the long-term, the use of new myths is essential for enforcing the primacy of an Indian identity in the northeast. Furthermore, as mentioned above, the environment in which this takes place must be conducive. The primary grievances within Assam relate to the control of economic resources, resulting from immigration and resulting in relative economic backwardness for the Assamese group. The impression that Assam, due to its agricultural productivity and natural resources would benefit financially through independence exists within the northeast. Because of this, some degree of empowerment of these resources to the Assamese group, however defined, is essential. The problem is that those individuals who would be most likely to benefit from any restructuring would be from the non-Assamese business communities within the state.

The argument throughout the thesis though has suggested that the demands of the Assam Movement represent a political, rather than a cultural, project. The solution, as demanded by Assamese elites, must also be political. The ability of the Indian central government to refuse investment projects in Assam due to the "security problem" overlook the fact that investment will, eventually, reduce the discontent, manifesting itself in the actions of the U.L.F.A..

Rural development projects, as demanded in the aims of the A.G.P. (see Appendix E) and as performed at times by the U.L.F.A. need to be implemented by government. Similarly large-scale industrial projects, or the recently built I.I.T. College in Guwahati, would serve the same purpose. These projects represent more powerful

symbols of central government involvement in Assam. Attempts by the centre to reinterpret history to demonstrate the involvement of the northeast in mainstream society have been demonstrated to be, at best, spurious. Utilization of the past supports the claims of the Assam Movement. If the future will see Assam, and the entire northeast, as a *de facto*, as well as *de jure*, part of the Indian state then economic advancement is the key.

The most difficult issue to resolve is clearly that of illegal immigration. Constructing more inclusive identities is clearly a long-term project. Repatriation is somewhat theoretical given that there are no states which would accept the immigrants. However, some change is necessary not just to satisfy the Assam Movement but to develop the economy of the state. It is clear that illegal immigration enables lower wages to be paid and therefore marginalizes the indigenous Assamese who prefer to fall back on small-holdings than work for very low wages.

This thesis has argued that illegal immigration is used as a metaphor for all immigration. It is the economically powerful legal immigrants who are of more concern to the Assam Movement. The role of rural economic development recurs, since the belief that the Assamese are lazy encourages employment of non-Assamese. In the same manner as the image of the Bengalis as non-martial persisted until the Bangladesh War of 1971, so successful rural development projects would be a symbol of what the Assamese could achieve and would dispel myths of indolence.

The alliance of regional parties within the United Front central government should encourage these developments. Despite Congress Party dominance having originally been based upon a recognition of regional diversity, a more tacit acknowledgement of federalism, as under the present system, may do much to emphasize the political integration of Assam into the Indian mainstream. Despite much of the preceding argument apparently supporting Selig Harrison's case (1960) for the Balkanization of India, there are neither theoretical nor practical reasons why this should occur.

There is clearly a need to recognize diversity within India but simultaneously to recognize that diversity cannot directly lead to unity. The necessity is for cultural divisions not to be given direct political significance. Thus, the present success of regional political parties, such as the A.G.P., could eventually reduce the power of cultural symbolisms if the parties are geographically inclusive rather than culturally exclusive. Thus it is necessary to reemphasize the territorial rather than the linguistic basis for being Assamese. There are signs that the A.G.P., to ensure its continued dominance, is attempting to redefine itself in this mould. Its success or failure will determine the future development of India.

Appendix A

Linguistic and Religious Divisions in Assam

Changing borders and the difficulties of accepting linguistic claims have made the raw census information hard to evaluate and widely disbelieved. Rather than attempt to deconstruct the census reports to establish the composition of the Assamese speaking community, this appendix will demonstrate the selective use of census information by various authors to argue their case.

Estimates of Religio-Linguistic-Tribal Communities in the Brahmaputra Valley, 1961

	1891	1961
Assamese	1,403,000	6,730,000
Other Indigenous Languages	423,000	680,000
Migrant Languages	624,000	1,775,000

The popularity of *Sons of the Soil* amongst supporters of the Assam Movement is due to Weiner's assessment of the composition of Assamese speakers in the 1961 Census. This suggests that the "native" Assamese are in a minority. Comparing population growth rates from 1891, prior to large-scale immigration, with the India-wide rate of population growth and analyzing religious and Scheduled Tribe allegiances, Weiner classifies Assamese speakers in 1961 thus;

Hindus native to Assam	2,806,000
Bengali Muslims	2,200,000
Migrants and descendants (exclusive of Bengali Muslims)	1,465,000
Assamese tribals	259,000

(Weiner 1978: 137-138)

Estimates of the Number of Foreigner's in Assam

Assessing population growth rates from 1951, and basing the 1981 population on Census Population Projection (low) and voter registration (high), A.K. Das suggests the following figures for the number of foreigners in Assam;

Year	Assam Population	Assam's Population including Indian immigrants and some foreigners	Foreigners
1951	8,028,856	8,028,856	0
1961	10,837,329	9,954,175	883,154
1971	14,625,152	12,243,618	2,381,534
1981 (estimates)			
low	19,890,000	15,059,646	4,830,354
average	21,399,000	15,059,646	6,339,354
high	22,908,000	15,059,646	7,848,354

(A.K. Das 1982: 327-330)

Estimate of the Scale of Muslim Immigration

Distribution of Population by Major Religions, India and Assam, 1961-1971

Religion	% Variation in Pop		Difference in % Growth between India and Assam
	India	Assam	
Hindu	23.69	37.18	+13.49
Muslim	30.84	31.00	+0.16
Christian	32.62	44.87	+12.25

Susanta Dass compares the variation in population increase between religious groups in India and Assam. Dass thereby concludes that "the apprehension of infiltration of Bengali Muslims between 1951 and 1971 is not statistically valid" (S.K. Dass 1980: 859).

Growth of Speakers of Major Indian Languages 1951-1971

Language	% Growth Rate
Hindi	8.4
Bengali	78.3
Telugu	35.6
Marathi	56.2
Tamil	41.9
Gujarati	58.6
Malayalam	63.9
Kannada	50.0
Oriya	50.9
Assamese	79.6

Given the higher than average growth of the Assamese language, Hussain concludes that fears about the Assamese language declining are very over-stated (Hussain 1993: 244).

Note: Dass provides perhaps the best example of the difficulty in interpreting census data in the region. In the 1951 Census Report some inhabitants of Goalpara insisted on recording their mother-tongue as Goalparia;

As a result, 4,088 persons (2,562 males and 1,526 females) returned their mother tongue as Goalparia. There being no such language in existence, these persons were included under Assamese as directed by the Registrar General, after consulting the state government. (Census 1951: 414, Cited in S.K. Dass 1980: 857)

Legislative Assembly Elections

Party	1952	1957	1962	1967	1972	1978	1983	1985	1991	1996
I.N.C.	76	71	79	73	95	8	91			
I.N.C.(I)						26	2	26	65	34
B.J.P.									10	4
A.G.P.								64	19	59
U.M.F.								17		
A.S.D.C.										5
A.P.H.L.C.			11	9						
Other Tribal Parties	7	9					3	3		
Janata						53			1	
C.P.I.	1	4		7	3	5		4	3	
C.P.I.(M)						11	2	2	2	
Other Left Parties	5	9	7	11	5			4		
Independents	16	12	8	25	11	23	13	10	24	17

Other Tribal Parties includes the P.T.C.A., the K.J.D, the G.N.C. and the T.U.P..
Other Left Parties includes the I.N.C.(S), the Socialist Party, the K.M.P.P., Swatantra, R.C.P.I., S.S.P. and the P.S.P..

Note: No elections were held in 17 constituencies in 1983.

Lok Sabha Elections

Party	1952	1957	1962	1967	1971	1977	1980	1985	1989	1991	1996
I.N.C.	11	9	9	10	13	10	2	4		8	5
I.N.C.(I)							1				
B.J.P.										2	1
A.G.P.								7		1	5
U.M.F.								1		1	
A.S.D.C.										1	1
A.P.H.L.C.			1	1	1						
P.T.C.A.								1			
B.L.D. (Janata)						3					
C.P.I.				1							
C.P.I.(M)										1	1
Other Left Parties	1	2	2	2				1			
Independents		1				1					1

Note: 11 elections were cancelled in 1980 and all 14 cancelled in 1989.

(V.B. Singh 1994, Baxter 1969, Keesings Record of World Events, B.P. Singh 1996)

Appendix C

Select Economic Indices

The following examples are neither conclusive nor sufficient. They do, however, demonstrate the manner by which feelings of neglect are justified.

Relative Per Capita Income

Year	Per Capita Income	
	India	Assam
1950-1951	469.7	520.1
1960-1961	550.1	505.4
1970-1971	632.8	534.7
1980-1981	696.8	569.4

(Hussain 1993: 81)

Irrigation Investment

State	Investment in Irrigation 1978-1979 (million Rupees)
Bihar	7,108
Haryana	2,762
Punjab	1,057
Andhra Pradesh	787
Sikkim	390
Assam	380

(A.K. Das 1982: 238)

Economic Comparisons between Assam and India

	India	Assam
Road Length/100 square kms.	49.90	72.59
Railways/100 square kms.	48.90	16.40
Per Capita Electricity Consumption (kWT)	111.68	31.59
Per Capita Bank Deposits	353	150

(B.P. Singh 1996: 10)

Number of Publishing Organizations in Select Indian Languages

Language	1980	1981	1982	1983
Assamese	102	90	110	140
English	6,910	5,425	6,010	6,125
Bengali	1,212	1,027	1,304	1,920
Hindi	2,450	2,708	2,856	2,700

(S.K. Das 1994: 66)

Appendix D

The Assam Accord, 1985
(Memorandum of Settlement)

1. Government have all along been most anxious to find a satisfactory solution to the problem of foreigners in Assam. The All Assam Students Union (A.A.S.U.) and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (A.A.G.S.P.) have also expressed their keenness to find such a solution.

2. The A.A.S.U. through their memorandum dated 2nd February, 1980 presented to the late Prime Minister, Smti. Indira Gandhi, conveyed their profound sense of apprehension regarding the influx of foreign nationals into Assam and the fear about adverse effects on the political social, cultural and life of the State.

3. Being fully alive to the genuine apprehensions of the people of Assam, the then Prime Minister initiated the dialogue with the A.A.S.U./A.A.G.S.P.. Subsequently, talks were held at the Prime Minister's and Home Minister's levels during the period 1980-83. Several rounds of informal talks were held during 1984. Formal discussions were resumed in March, 1985.

4. Keeping all aspects of the problem including constitutional and legal provisions, international agreements and national commitments and humanitarian consideration, it has been decided to proceed as follows:

<u>Foreigners Issue:</u>

5.1 For purpose of detection and deletion of foreigners, 1.1.1966 shall be the base date and year.

5.2 All persons who came to Assam prior to 1.1.1966 including those amongst them whose names appeared on the electoral rolls used in 1967 elections, shall be regularised.

5.3 Foreigners who came to Assam after 1.1.1966 (inclusive) and up to 24.3.71 shall be detected in accordance with the provisions of the Foreigners Act, 1946 and the Foreigners (Tribunal) Order 1964.

5.4 Names of foreigners so detected will be deleted from the electoral rolls in force. Such persons will be required to register themselves before the Registration Officers of the respective districts in accordance with Registration of Foreigners Act 1939 and Registration of Foreigners Rules, 1939.

5.5 For this purpose, Government of India will undertake suitable strengthening of the government machinery.

5.6 On the expiry of ten year following the date of detection, the names of all such persons which have been deleted from the rolls shall be restored.

5.7 All persons who were expelled earlier, but have since re-entered illegally into Assam shall be expelled.

5.8 Foreigners who came to Assam on or after March 25, 1971 shall be detected, deleted and expelled in accordance with law. Immediate and practical steps shall be taken to expel such foreigners.

5.9 The Government will give due consideration to certain difficulties expressed by the AASU/AAGSP regarding implementation of Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act 1983.

Safeguards and Economic Development:

6. Constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards, as may be appropriate, shall be provided to protect, preserve and promote the cultural, social and linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people.

7. The Government take this opportunity to renew their commitment for the speedy, all-round economic development of Assam, so as to improve the standard of living of the people. Special emphasis will be placed on education and science and technology through establishment of national institutions.

Other Issues:

8.1 The Government will arrange for the issue of citizenship certificates in future only by the authorities of the Central Government.

8.2 Specific complaints that may be made by the A.A.S.U./A.A.G.S.P. about irregular issuance of Indian Citizenship Certificates (ICC) will be looked into.

9.1 The international border shall be made secure against future infiltration by erection of physical barriers like walls, barbed wire fencing and other obstacles at appropriate places. Patrolling by security forces on land and riverine routes along the international border shall be adequately intensified. In order to further strengthen the security arrangements, to prevent effectively future infiltration, adequate number of check points shall be set up.

9.2 Besides the arrangements mentioned above and keeping in view security considerations, a road all along the international border shall be constructed so as to facilitate patrolling by security forces. Land between border and the road would be kept free of human habitation wherever possible. Riverine patrolling along the international border would be intensified. All effective measures would be adopted to prevent infiltrators from crossing or attempting to cross the international border.

10. It will be ensured that relevant laws for prevention of encroachment of government lands and lands in tribal belts and blocks are strictly enforced and unauthorised encroachers evicted as laid down under such laws.

11. It will be ensured that the relevant law restricting acquisition of immovable properties by foreigners in Assam is strictly enforced.

12. It will be ensured that Birth and Death Registers are duly maintained.

<u>Restoration of Normalcy:</u>

13. The All Assam Students Union (A.A.S.U.) and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (A.A.G.S.P.) call off the agitation, assume full co-operation and dedicate themselves towards the development of the country.

14. The Central and State Government have agreed to:-

(a) Review with sympathy and withdraw cases of disciplinary action taken against employees in the context of the agitation and to ensure that there is no victimisation;

(b) Frame a scheme for ex-gratia payments to next of kin of those who were killed in the course of the agitation;

(c) Give sympathetic consideration to proposal for relaxation of upper age limit for employment in public services in Assam, having regard to exceptional situation that prevailed in holding of academic and competitive examinations, etc. in the context of agitation in Assam;

(d) Undertake review of detention cases, if any, as well as cases against persons charged with criminal offenses in connection with the agitation except those charged with commission of heinous offenses;

(e) Consider withdrawal of prohibitory orders/ notification in force, if any;

15. The Ministry of Home Affairs will be the nodal Ministry for the implementation of the above.

Government has agreed to the following:

(a) Election Commission will be requested to ensure preparation of fair electoral rolls;

(b) Time for settlement of claims and objections to be extended by 30 days, subject to this being consistent with the election rules; and

(c) Election Commission will be requested to send Central Observers.

In order to accelerate the industrial and educational development, the Government of India has agreed:

(a) To establish an oil refinery in Assam. Government will render all possible assistance in terms of institutional and Bank finance to

facilitate the establishment of a refinery in the Private Sector.

(b) Central Government will render full assistance to the State Government in their efforts to reopen:-

(i) Ashok Paper Mill.

(ii) Jute Mills.

(c) An I.I.T. will be set up in Assam.

Appendix E

The Aims and Objectives of the A.G.P.

1. Establishment of a progressive society free from exploitation and based on a political equality, economic development and social justice.

2. To work hard for the achievement of secularism, democracy and socialism, to strive for peace, progress and social harmony and integration and to promote these causes among the people.

3. To secure more rights for the State in a real Federal Union.

4. Full utilisation of Assam's natural resources in the interest of all round benefit for the people and on that basis to strive for strengthening the state's economic foundations.

5. Protection of forests and reserved area and adoption of measures for cultivation of fallow lands and increase productivity.

6. To provide for full protection of the interests of local candidates in all matters of employment.

7. Restructuring of the state's plan so that the benefits of a planned economy serve the interests of the poorest sections of society and thus ensure maximum welfare for the people of Assam.

8. Protection of local peasantry and workers by revising land laws and policy relating to industry.

9. Equal opportunities for all in the field of education, introduction of employment oriented educational courses and ensuring autonomy in the field of higher education.

10. Strengthening understanding and goodwill among different ethnic groups and sections of people, and adoption of all measures for the development of all indigenous languages, art and culture.

11. Extension of health care facilities to the poorest sections also through decentralisation of public health service measures.

12. To accelerate the pace of rural development by making improvement in the field of transport and communication.

13. Promotion of the scientific temper in the society in order to keep pace with future industrial development and for all this, to lay emphasis on science and technology.

14. In order that national and international problems could be faced appropriately, to seek to extend cooperation with all democratic secular and such other parties as are opposed to regional imbalance and respect the legitimate rights of small nationalities; such cooperation would depend on the merits of the issues.

15. To seek to build up unity in action with all like minded parties of the north-eastern states for facing problems of common concern.

16. To adopt all measures to realise in practice the constitutional safeguards provided in the Constitution for all comparatively backward people including S.C./S.T. categories irrespective of their habitation, in hills or plains areas.

(cited in Hussain 1993: 303-304)

Appendix F

Premiers/Chief Ministers of Assam

Mohammed Saadulla (Assam Union Muslim League)	1937-1938
Gopinath Bardoloi (Congress)	1938-1939
Mohammed Saadulla (Muslim League)	1939-1946
Gopinath Bardoloi (Congress)	1946-1950
Bishnu Ram Mehdi (Congress)	1950-1957
Bimala Chaliha (Congress)	1957-1970
Mohendra Choudhury (Congress)	1970-1972
Sarat Sinha (Congress)	1972-1978
Golap Borbora (Janata)	1978-1979
Jogen Hazarika (Janata)	1979
President's Rule	1979-1980
Anwara Taimur (Congress)	1980-1981
President's Rule	1981-1982
Keshab Gogoi (Congress)	1982
President's Rule	1982-1983
Hiteshwar Saikia (Congress I)	1983-1985
Prafulla Mahanta (A.G.P.)	1985-1990
President's Rule	1990-1991
Hiteshwar Saikia (Congress I)	1991-1996
Prafulla Mahanta (A.G.P.)	1996-Present

a TTK guide

ASSAM

Scale 1 : 950,000

0 9.5 19 Kms

0 6 12 Miles

LEGEND

DISPUR	State Capital	52	National Highway with Number
BARPETA	District Headquarters		Major Road
Majuli	Taluk Headquarters		Other Road
Digboi	Other Towns	T	Places of Importance
	International Boundary		Good Accommodation
	State Boundary		Aerodrome
	District Boundary	26	Distances in Kilometers
	Railway Line		

The boundary of Meghalaya shown on this map is as interpreted from the North Eastern Areas (Reorganisation) Act, 1971, but has yet to be verified.

CHINA
TIBET
C H I N A
T I B E T
B H U T A N
B A N G L A D E S H
M Y A N M A R
ARUNACHAL PRADESH
WEST KAMENG
EAST KAMENG
LOWER SUBANSIRI
UPPER SUBANSIRI
WEST SIANG
EAST SIANG
DHEMAJI
LAKHIMPUR
NORTH LAKHIMPUR
DIBRUGARH
TINSUKIA
SIBSAGAR
JORHAT
GOLAGHAT
MAJULI
TIRAP
CHANGLANG
LONGDING
KHONSA
NAMSAI
PAPUM PARE
KURUNG KUMEY
LOWER DIBANG VALLEY
DIBANG VALLEY
ANJAW
LOHIT
ITANAGAR
TEZPUR
SONITPUR
DARRANG
MANGALDAI
NALBARI
BARPETA
KOKRAJHAR
BONGAIGAON
DHUBURI
GOALPARA
KAMRUP
GUWAHATI
DISPUR
NAGAON
MARIGAON
KARBI ANGLONG
DIMA HASAO
DIPHU
NAGALAND
KOHIMA
DIMAPUR
PHEK
MOKOKCHUNG
TUENSANG
WOKHA
ZUNHEBOTO
KIPHIRE
MON
NIUAS
WAKKA
PONGCHOU
MANIPUR
IMPHAL
BISHNUPUR
THOUBAL
CHURACHANDPUR
TENGNOUPAL
CHANDEL
KAMJONG
SENAPATI
KANGPOKPI
TAMENGLONG
UKHRUL
JIRIBAM
NUNGBA
HENGLEP
MEGHALAYA
WEST GARO HILLS
TURA
WILLIAMNAGAR
EAST GARO HILLS
WEST KHASI HILLS
SHILLONG
NONGSTOIN
EAST KHASI HILLS
JAINTIA HILLS
JOWAI
NORTH CACHAR HILLS
HAFLONG
MIZORAM
TRIPURA
KARIMGANJ
HAILAKANDI
CACHAR
DHARMANAGAR
KAMALPUR
BARAK
KOPILI
DIKHOU
DHANSIRI
KAMENG
BHARALI
JIA BHARALI
BRAHMAPUTRA
MANAS
SUBANSIRI
KAMLA
KURUNG
PAPPU
KAMENG
BOMDILA
TAWANG
SEPPA
ZIRO
PALIN
NYAPIN
DAPORIJO
BASAR
TALI
KIMIN
SAGALI
PASIGHAT
ALONG
YINGKIONG
TUTING
MECHUKA
TALIHA
DAMBUK
DAPORIJO
KOLORIANG
SILAPATHAR
DHEMAJI
GOHPUR
BIHPURIA
MAJULI
JORHAT
GOLAGHAT
SIBSAGAR
NAMSAI
TINSUKIA
DIBRUGARH
LAKHIMPUR
DHEMAJI
SEPPA
BOMDILA
TAWANG
ZIRO
PALIN
NYAPIN
DAPORIJO
BASAR
ITANAGAR
TEZPUR
NAGAON
MARIGAON
KARBI ANGLONG
DIPHU
DIMAPUR
KOHIMA
IMPHAL
JIRIBAM
TAMENGLONG
UKHRUL
SENAPATI
KANGPOKPI
KAMJONG
CHURACHANDPUR
TENGNOUPAL
CHANDEL
BISHNUPUR
THOUBAL
HENGLEP
NUNGBA
SILCHAR
KARIMGANJ
HAILAKANDI
CACHAR
DHARMANAGAR
KAMALPUR
MIZORAM
TRIPURA
MEGHALAYA
WEST GARO HILLS
TURA
WILLIAMNAGAR
EAST GARO HILLS
WEST KHASI HILLS
SHILLONG
NONGSTOIN
EAST KHASI HILLS
JAINTIA HILLS
JOWAI
NORTH CACHAR HILLS
HAFLONG
KOKRAJHAR
BONGAIGAON
DHUBURI
GOALPARA
KAMRUP
GUWAHATI
DISPUR
BARPETA
NALBARI
DARRANG
MANGALDAI
SONITPUR
TEZPUR
WEST BENGAL
BHUTAN
CHINA
TIBET
MYANMAR
BANGLADESH

Designed, Cartographed, Printed and Published by
TTK PHARMA LIMITED – PRINTING DIVISION
328, G.S.T. Road, Chromepet, Madras 600 044, India

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Private Papers

Miles Bronson: Letter to Rev S Peck June 22 1840

East India Company

Hamilton, Walter, 1820. *A Description of Hindostan.* [1971 Reprint. Delhi: Oriental Publishers]

Hamilton, Walter, 1828. *The East India Gazetteer.* [1984 Reprint. Delhi: D.R. Publishing]

Thornton, Edward, 1858. *A Gazetteer of the Territories under the Government of the East India Company and of the Native States on the Continent of India.* [1984 Reprint. Delhi: Neeraj]

Government of India:

1887. *The Gazetteer of India.* Delhi: Government of India Publications Division.

Gait, E.A., Allen, B.C., Allen, C.G.H., Howard. H.F., c.1902. *Gazetteer of Bengal and North-East India.* [1984 Reprint Delhi: Mittal]

1922/23. *Report on the Administration of the Excise Department.*

1994. *The Constitution of India.* [Revised and Updated] Delhi: Universal Book Traders.

1955. *Report of the State Reorganisation Commission.* New Delhi: Government of India Press.

1955. *Report of the Backward Classes Commission.* New Delhi: Government of India Press.

1975. *"Why Emergency"* (White Paper)

North Eastern Council, 1980. *Basic Statistics of the North-East Region 1980.* Calcutta: N.E.C. Secretariat.

Report of the Commission on Centre-State Relations. 1987. New Delhi: Government of India Press.

Census Reports. 1931, 1951, 1961, 1971.

Legislative Assembly. *Legislative Assembly Debates*.

Constituent Assembly. *Constituent Assembly Debates*.

Lok Sabha. *Agrahayana*. (Parliamentary Debates).

Lok Sabha/Rajya Sabha, 1985. *Statement by the Home Minister Regarding Assam Accord*.

India. New Delhi: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting.

Government of Assam:

Assam Trade Report, 1882-1883. Shillong: Assam Secretariat Press. 1883.

Report on Bengal and Assam: Papers Relating to the Reconstitution of the Provinces of Bengal and Assam. Simla: Government Central Printing Office. 1906. [Reprinted 1983 Naurang Rai, Trustee D.K.F. Trust.]

Kakati, B., 1941. *Assamese: Its Formation and Development*. Gauhati: Government of Assam in the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies.

Kamrup District Gazetteer. 1971.

Government of Bengal:

Mills, A.J.M.. *Report on the Province of Assam*. 1853. [Reprinted 1984 C.P. Saikia: Publication Board, Assam]

Northern Assam Tea Company:

Report of the Directors of the Northern Assam Tea Company. London: R. Clay. 1867.

Report of the Directors of the Northern Assam Tea Company. London; R. Clay. 1868.

Assam Congress Party:

Assam Congress Opium Enquiry Report. 1925, Jorhat.

The Assam Assembly Congress Party Report. 1939, Shillong.

Assam Pradesh Congress (I) Manifesto. 1996, Guwahati.

United People's Party of Assam:

United People's Party of Assam Manifesto. 1996, Guwahati.

Unpublished Papers

Dutta Barua, Munin N., 1983a. *Congress Party Briefing Document*.

Dutta Barua, Munin N., 1983b. *A Few Important Socio-Economic Aspects of the Current Catastrophe in Assam*.

Ogborn, Keith Peter, 1982. *The Development of Nationalist Politics in the Assam Valley 1929-1939*. PhD Thesis

Note

Interviews and discussions were carried out with both elite and subaltern groups in Assam, including political activists, newspaper editors, businessmen and academics in Assam throughout the summer of 1996. Given the political situation, most interviewees wished to remain anonymous.

Secondary Sources

Books

Ahluwalia, B.K. and Ahluwalia, Sashi, 1986. *Social and Economic Development in North-East India*. Delhi: Gian.

Ahmed, Ishtiaq, 1996. *State, Nation and Ethnicity in Contemporary South Asia*. London: Pinter.

Anderson, Benedict, 1991. *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.

Asom Jatiya Mahasabha, 1958. *Assam's Say and Suggestions*. Gauhati.

Assam Sahitya Sabha, 1980. *Eclipse in the East*. Gauhati.

Babb, Lawrence A. and Wadley, Susan, S., 1995. *Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia*. Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press.

Bahadur, K.P., 1977. *Caste, Tribes and Culture of India: Assam*. Delhi: Ess Ess Publications

Balakrishnan, Gopal, (ed.), 1996. *Mapping the Nation*. London: Verso.

Banton, Michael, 1983. *Racial and Ethnic Competition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Barnett, M.R., 1976. *The Politics of Cultural Nationalism in South India*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Barpujari, H.K., 1970. *The Problem of the Hill Tribes of the North-East Frontier 1822-1842*. Gauhati: Lawyer's Book Stall.

_____, 1976. *The Problem of the Hill Tribes of the North-East Frontier 1843-1872*. Gauhati: Basanti Prakash.

_____, 1981. *The Problem of the Hill Tribes of the North-East Frontier 1873-1962*. Gauhati: Spectrum Publications.

Barua, Indrani, 1990. *Pressure Groups in Assam*. New Delhi: Omsons Publications.

Baxi, Upendra and Parekh, Bhiku, 1995. *Crisis and Change in Contemporary India*. New Delhi: Sage.

Baxter, Craig, 1969. *Voting Trends in India*. London: Columbia University Press.

Bayly, C.A., 1990. *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

_____, 1996. *Empire and Information*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bezbaruah, Madan P., 1996. "Cultural Sub-Nationalism in India's North-East: An Overview". in Mitra, Subrata K. and Lewis, R. Alison. *Subnational Movements in South Asia*. Oxford: Westview Press.

Bhattacharyya, Satish, 1990. *The Hero of Saraighat*. Gauhati: Lawyer's Book Stall.

Bhuyan, S.K., 1949. *Anglo-Assamese Relations 1771-1826*. Gauhati: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies.

Bose, M.L., 1989. *Social History of Assam*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company.

Bose, Sisir K. and Bose, Sugata, (eds.), 1997. *The Essential Writings of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Brass, Paul, 1994. *Politics of India since Independence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Brown, Richard, 1973. "Anthropology and Colonial Rule: The Case of Godfrey Wilson and the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute." in Asad, Talal (ed.), *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*. London: Ithaca.

Burns, George, 1973. *The Burma Wars*. London: Granada Publishing.

Cambridge History of India, 1937. *The Mughal Period*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cantlie, Audrey, 1985. "Vaishnava Reform Sects in Assam." In Burghart, Richard and Cantlie, Audrey, (eds.) *Indian Religion*. London: Curzon Press.

Cassirer, Ernst, 1946. *The Myth of the State*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press.

Chakravarty, Sumita S., 1993. *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema 1947-1987*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press.

Chandra, Bipan, 1979. *Nationalism and Colonialism in Modern India*. New Delhi: Orient Longman.

Chatterjee, Partha, 1986. *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*. London: Zed Books.

Chatterji, Suniti Kumar, 1955. *The Place of Assam in the History and Civilisation of India*. Gauhati: University of Gauhati.

Chaube, S.K., 1973. *Hill Politics in North-East India*. New Delhi: Orient Longman.

Chaudhuri, Tushar Kanti, 1982. *Demographic Trends in Assam 1921-1971*. Delhi: B.R. Publishing.

Cigar, Norman, 1995. *Genocide in Bosnia*. Texas: A&M University Press.

Cohen, Abner, 1974a. *Urban Ethnicity*. London: Tavistock.

_____, 1974b. *Two-Dimensional Man*. London: Tavistock.

Cohn, Bernard, 1988. *An Anthropologist Amongst the Historians and Other Essays*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

_____, 1996. "Representing Authority in Victorian India." in Hobsbawm, Eric, and Ranger, Terence, 1996. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Das, Amiya Kumar, 1982. *Assam's Agony*. New Delhi: Lancers Publishers.

Das, Samir Kumar, 1994. *ULFA: A Political Analysis*. Delhi: Ajanta.

Datta, Birendranath, Sarma, Nabin Chandra and Das, Prabin Chandra, 1994. *A Handbook of Folklore Material of North-East India*. Gauhati: United Publishers.

Deka, K.N., 1976. "Assam: The Challenge of Political Integration and Congress Leadership." in Narain, Iqbal. *State Politics In India*. Meerut: Meenakshi Prakashan.

Downs, Frederick S., 1994. *Essays on Christianity in North-East India*. New Delhi: Indus.

Dube, S.C. (ed.), 1977. *India Since Independence*. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing.

Edwardes, Michael, 1971. *Nehru: A Political Biography*. London: Allen Lane The Penguin Press.

Eley, Geoffrey, 1994. "Nations, Publics and Political Cultures: Placing Habermas in the Nineteenth Century." in Dirks, Nicholas B.. Eley, Geoffrey and Ortner, Sherry B. *Culture/Power/History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Elwin, Verrier, 1939. *The Baiga*. London: John Murray.

_____, 1955. *India's North-East Frontier in the Twentieth Century*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Eriksen, Thomas Hylland, 1993. *Ethnicity and Nationalism*. London: Pluto Press.

Ferro, Marc, 1997. *Colonization: A Global History*. London: Routledge.

Foucault, Michel, 1977. *Discipline and Punish*. London: Penguin.

Frankel, Francine, 1978. *India's Political Economy 1946-1977*. Guildford, Princeton University Press.

Freitag, Sandra B., 1992. *Culture and Power in Banaras*. Oxford: University of California Press.

Gait, Edward, 1992 (reprint). *A History of Assam*. Gauhati: Lawyer's Book Stall.

Gallanter, Marc, 1967. "Group Membership and Group Preferences in India." in David C. Buxbaum, (ed.) *Traditional and Modern Legal Institutions in Asia and Africa*. Leiden: E.J. Brill.

_____, 1984. *Competing Equalities*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Gandhi, Mahatma, 1966. *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi XXI*. New Delhi: Government of India.

Gandhi, Rajmohan, 1990. *Patel: A Life*. Ahmedabad: Jitendra T. Desai.

Gassah, L.S., 1992. *Regional Political Parties in North-East India*. Guwahati: Omsons Publications.

Gellner, Ernest, 1983. *Nations and Nationalism*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Ghurye, Govind Sadashiv, 1980. *The Scheduled Tribes of India*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction.

Giddens, Anthony. 1984. *The Nation State and Violence*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Gohain, Hiren, 1985. *Assam: A Burning Question*. Guwahati: Spectrum Publications.

Goswami, P.C., 1963. *The Economic Development of Assam*. London: Asia Publishing House.

Griffiths, Percival, 1967. *The History of the Indian Tea Industry*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.

Guha, Amalendu, 1988 (Reprint). *Planter-Raj to Swaraj*. New Delhi: People's Publishing House.

Gupta, Shekhar, 1984. *Assam: A Valley Divided*. Gauhati: Vikas Publishing.

Hansen, Marcus Lee, 1940. *The Immigrant in American History*. New York: Harper and Row.

Harman, S., 1977. *Plight of Muslims in India*. London: D.L. Publications.

Harrison, Selig, 1960. *India: The Most Dangerous Decade*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Hazarika, Sanjoy, 1995. *Strangers of the Mist*. New Delhi: Penguin.

Hechter, M., 1977. *Internal Colonialism*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Hewitt, Vernon, 1989. *Ethnicity, Sub-Nationalism and Federalism in South Asia*. London: Shakti.

_____, 1997. *The New International Politics of South Asia*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Hobsbawm, Eric, 1994. *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

_____ and Ranger, Terence, 1996. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Holderness, Sir T.W., 1928. *Peoples and Problems of India*. London: Thornton Butterworth.

Horowitz, D.L., 1985. *Ethnic Politics*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Howell, D., 1993. *The Roots of Rural Ethnic Mobilisation*. Aldershot: Dartmouth.

Hussain, Monirul, 1993. *The Assam Movement*. New Delhi: Manak Publications.

Inden, Ronald, 1990. *Imagining India*. London: Blackwell.

Jaffrelot, Christophe, 1993. *The Hindu Nationalist Movement in India*. London: Penguin.

Jain, C.K., 1992. *Constitution of India in Precept and Practice*. New Delhi: C.B.S.

Jalal, Ayesha, 1995. *Democracy and Authoritarianism in South Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Joshi, Shashi and Joshi, Bhagwan, 1994. *Struggle for Hegemony in India 1920-1947 Vol III*. New Delhi: Sage.

Kohli, Atul, 1988. *India's Democracy: An Analysis of Changing State Society Relations*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Kothari, Rajni, 1988. *Integration and Exclusion in Indian Politics*. London: Shakti.

Kroeber, A.L., 1923. *Anthropology*. London: George G. Harrap.

Laclau, Ernesto, 1994. *The Making of Political Identities* London: Verso.

Lahiri, R.M., 1994. *The Annexation of Assam*. Calcutta: Firma KLM.

Limaye, Madhu, 1987. *Contemporary Indian Politics*. London: Sangam.

Lutgendorf, Philip, 1995. "All in the (Raghu) Family: A Video Epic in Cultural Context." in Babb, Lawrence A. and Wadley, Susan, S. (eds.), *Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia*. Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press.

Madan, T.N., 1995. *Pathways*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Mahanta, Prafulla Kumar, 1986. *The Tussle Between the Citizens and Foreigners in Assam*. Gauhati: Vikas Publishing.

Manor, James, 1989, "The Dynamics of Political Integration and Disintegration." in Wilson, A.J. and Dalton, D. (eds.), *The States of South Asia*. London: Hurst & Company.

_____, (ed.) 1991. *Rethinking Third World Politics*. London: Longman.

Marx, Karl and Engels, Frederick, 1888 (Reprint). *Manifesto of* the Communist Party, London: William Reeves.

McAll, Christopher, 1990. *Class, Ethnicity and Social Inequality*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.

McGarry, John and O'Leary, Brendan, 1993. *The Politics of Ethnic Conflict Regulation*. London: Routledge.

Mehra, Parshotam, 1979. *The North-Eastern Frontier*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Metcalf, Thomas R., 1997. *Ideologies of the Raj*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mills, J.P., 1937. *The Rengma Nagas*. London: MacMillan.

Mitchell, J. Clyde, 1956. *The Kalela Dance*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Mitra, Rathin and Gupta, Barun Das, 1967. *A Common Perspective for North-East India*. Calcutta: Pannalal Das Gupta.

Mitra, Subrata K., 1991. "On State, Society and Discourse in India". in Manor, James (ed.) *Rethinking Third World Politics*. London: Longman.

_____, 1994. "Caste, Democracy and the Politics of Community Formation in India". in Searle-Chatterjee and Sharma, Ursula, (eds.) *Contextualising Caste*. Oxford: Blackwell Publications/The Sociological Review.

_____ and Lewis, R. Alison, 1996. *Subnational Movements in South Asia*. Oxford: Westview Press.

Moon, Penderel, 1989. *The British Conquest and Dominion of India*. London: Duckworth.

Morris-Jones, W.H., 1967. *The Government and Politics of India*. London: Hutchinson University Library.

Moulton, Edward C., 1988. "The Early Congress and the British Radical Connection." in Low, D.A. (ed.), *The Indian National Congress*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Moynihan, Daniel Patrick, 1994. *Pandaemonium*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mujeeb, M., 1967. *The Indian Muslims*. London: George Allen and Unwin.

Munshi, K.M., 1964. *Bhagavad Gita and Modern Life*. Chowpatty, Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan.

Nag, Sajal, 1990. *Roots of Ethnic Conflict*. New Delhi: Manohar Publications.

Narain, Iqbal, 1976. *State Politics In India*. Meerut: Meenakshi Prakashan.

Nehru, Jawaharlal, 1946. *The Discovery of India*. New York: John Day Company.

Nugent, Nicholas, 1990. *Rajiv Gandhi: Son of a Dynasty*. London: B.B.C..

Pandey, Gyanendra, 1990.*The Construction of Communalism in Colonial India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

_____, (ed.), 1993. *Hindus and Others*. New Delhi: Penguin.

Park, Robert Ezra, 1950. *Race and Culture*. London: Collier-MacMillan.

Petersen, William, 1979. *The Background to Ethnic Conflict*. Leiden: E.J.Brill.

Phadnis, Urmila, 1990. *Ethnicity and Nation-Building in South Asia*. New Delhi: Sage.

Quigley, Declan, 1993. *The Interpretation of Caste*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

_____, 1994. "Is a Theory of Caste Still Possible?" in Searle-Chatterjee, Mary and Sharma, Ursula, (eds.) *Contextualising Caste*. Oxford: Blackwell Publications/The Sociological Review.

Rastogi, P.N., 1986. *Ethnic Tensions in Indian Society*. Delhi: Mittal Publications.

Rafiabadi, H.N., 1988. *Assam from Agitation to Accord*. New Delhi: Genuine Publications.

Roberts, Andrew (ed.), 1990. *The Colonial Movement in Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Robinson, Francis, (ed.), 1989. *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and the Maldives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rogowski, R. and Wasserspring, L., 1971. *Does Political Modernization Exist? Corporatism in Old and New Societies*. Beverly Hills, California: Sage.

Roosens, Eugeen E., 1989. *Creating Ethnicity: The Process of Ethnogenesis*. Newbury Park: Sage.

Royal Institute for International Affairs, 1939. *Nationalism*. London: Oxford University Press.

Rudolph, Lloyd I. and Rudolph, Susanne Hoeber, 1987. *In Pursuit of Lakshmi*. London: University of Chicago Press.

Said, Edward W., 1995. *Orientalism*. London: Penguin.

Saxena, R.K., 1975. *Social Reforms, Infanticide and Sati*. New Delhi: Trimurti Publications.

Sema, Hokishe, 1986. *Emergence of Nagaland* New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Pvt Ltd.

Shehadi, Kamal, 1993. *Ethnic Self-Determination and the Break-Up of States*. London: International Institute of Strategic Studies.

Singh, B.P., 1996. *The Problem of Change*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Singh, V.B., 1994. *Elections in India*. New Delhi: Sage.

Smith, Anthony, 1986. *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*. Oxford: Blackwell.

_____, 1990. *National Identity*. London: Penguin.

Smith, Donald Eugene, 1963. *India as a Secular State*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Sinor, Dennis, 1970. *Orientalism and History*. London: Indiana University Press.

Sreenivasa Murthy, H.V., 1973. *Vaisnavism of Samkardeva and Ramanuja*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass (Publications).

Stalin, J., 1945. *Problems of Leninism*. Moscow: Foreign Language Publishing House.

Stocking, George W., 1987. *Victorian Anthropology*. London: Collier MacMillan.

Thakur, Ramesh, 1995. *The Government and Politics of India*. London: MacMillan Press.

Thompson, Dennis L. and Ronen, Dov, 1986. *Ethnicity, Politics and Development*. Boulder; Lynne Rienner.

Trivedi, V.R. (ed.), 1995. *Documents on Assam*. New Delhi: Omsons Publications.

Turner, Bryan S., 1994. *Orientalism, Postmodernism and Globalism*. London: Routledge.

Tylor, Edward B., 1920 (6th ed.). *Primitive Culture*. London: John Murray.

Vakil, A.K., 1985. *Reservation Policy and Scheduled Castes in India*. New Delhi: Ashish Publications.

Vanaik, Achin, 1997. *The Furies of Indian Communalism*. London: Verso.

Waldron, Arthur, 1990. *The Great Wall of China: from History to Myth*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Walker, William O., 1991. *Opium and Foreign Policy*. London: University of North Carolina Press.

Washbrook, David, 1973. "Country Politics: Madras 1880-1930". in Gallagher, John, Johnson, Gordon and Seal, Anil, (eds.) *Locality, Province and Nation: Essays on Indian Politics 1870-1940*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wavell, A.P., 1973. *Wavell: The Viceroy's Journal*. London: Oxford University Press.

Weiner, Myron, 1978. *Sons of the Soil*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Wieschhoff, H.A., 1944. *Colonial Policies in Africa*. Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press.

Wilson, Godfrey, 1941-42. *An Essay on the Economics of Detribalization in Northern Rhodesia, Parts I-II*. Livingston: Rhodes Livingstone Institute.

Worsley, Peter, 1984. *The Three Worlds*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson.

Articles

Ansari, Iqbal A., 1990. "Discrepant Perceptions of Hindus and Muslims in India on Communally Sensitive Issues: A Note." *Journal of the Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 11:1.

Barua, Indira, 1981. "Marriage among the Ahoms: A Study in Two Ahom Village." *Journal of the Indian Anthropological Society*, 16:1.

Baruah, Apurba Kumar, 1983. "Assam Movement: Distortions in Analysis." *Man and Development*, 5:4.

Baruah, Sanjib, 1986. "Immigration, Ethnic Conflict and Political Turmoil - Assam 1979-1985." *Asian Survey*, XXVI:11.

_____, 1994. "'Ethnic' Conflict as State-Society Struggle: The Poetics and Politics of Assamese Micro-Nationalism." *Modern Asian Studies*, 28:3.

Bhattacharya, Dipankar, 1993. "Karbi Anglong Revisited." *Economic and Political Weekly*, (28 August).

Birch, A.H., 1978. "Minority Nationalist Movements and Theories of Political Integration." *Ethnicity*, 3.

Brass, Paul, 1976. "Ethnicity and Nationality Formation." *Ethnicity*, 3.

Breuilly, John, 1985. "Reflections on Nationalism." *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 15.

Brown, David, 1989. "Ethnic Revival: Perspectives on State and Society." *Third World Quarterly*, 1989.

Buck, David D., 1994. "Dimensions of Ethnic and Cultural Nationalism in Asia - A Symposium." *Journal of Asian Studies*, 53:1.

Burton, John W., 1992. "Representing Africa: Colonial Anthropology Revisited." *Journal of African and Asian Studies*, 27:3-4.

Calhoun, Craig, 1993. "Nationalism and Ethnicity." *Annual Review of Sociology*, 19.

Caplan, Lionel, 1991. "'Bravest of the Brave' Representations of 'the Gurkha' in British Military Writings." *Modern Asian Studies* 25:3.

Chauhan, S.K., 1972. "Party Preferences: A Study of Political Attitudes in Upper Assam." *Man in India*, 52:4.

Choudhury, Sujit, 1985. "Election Commission and the Assam Accord." *Economic and Political Weekly*, (7 December).

Clapham, Christopher, 1970. "The Context of African Political Thought." *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 8:1.

Connor, Walker, 1972. "Nation Building and Nation Destroying." *World Politics*, 24:31-55.

Danda, Ajit, 1989. "On Ethnicity and Political Mobility." *Journal of the Indian Anthropological Society*, 24:3.

Darnell, Alfred T. and Parikh, Sunita, 1988. "Religion, Ethnicity and the Role of the State, Explaining Conflict in Assam." *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 11:3.

Dass, Susanta Krishna, 1980. "Immigration and Demographic Transformation of Assam, 1891-1981" *Economic and Political Weekly*, (10 May).

Downs, Frederick S., 1989. "Social Influences on Nineteenth Century Baptist Missionaries in India." *American Baptist Quarterly*, VIII:4.

Dubey, S.M., 1980. "The Assam Movement: A Preliminary Study in the Sociology of Politics and Development." *Man and Development*, II:3.

Dutt-Luithui, Ela, 1985. "Violence in India: The Case of the Naga Nagaland Movement." *South Asia Bulletin*, V:2.

Economic and Political Weekly, 1979. "Assam: Set for Confrontation." (8 December)

_____, 1983. "Assam: Election at Bayonet Point." (29 January)

_____, 1993. "Another Deal in the Offing?" (6 March)

Embree, Ainslie T., 1974. "South Asia: The Fourth World." *International Journal of Politics*. IV:3.

Eriksen, Thomas Hylland, 1992. "Ethnicity and Nationalism." *Bulletin of Peace Proposals*, 23:2.

Flint, John, 1983. "The Failure of Planned Decolonization in Africa." *African Affairs*, 82:328.

Gandhi, Raj S., 1993. "The Extremes of Ethnic Violence: Some Explanations of Upper Caste-Scheduled Caste Violence in India." *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations*, 19:2.

Goswami, B.B., 1978. "Tribe to Peasant, Not Caste." *Eastern Anthropologist*. 31:3.

Guha, Amalendu, 1980. "Little Nationalism Turned Chauvinist, Assam's Anti-Foreigner Upsurge, 1979-1980." *Economic and Political Weekly*, (Special Number, October).

Guha, Ranajit, 1982. " On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India." *Subaltern Studies*, I.

Guhan, S., 1992. "Comprehending Equalities." *Economic and Political Weekly*, (1-8 August).

Gupta, Shaibal, 1986. "Emerging Configuration of the Contradictions between Nationalism and Sub-Nationalism in India." *Journal of Social and Economic Studies*, 3:2.

Gupta, Surendra K., 1984. "Pattern and Characteristic of Migrants in Assam" *Journal of Sociological Studies*, 3:January.

Guru, Gopal, 1984. "Reservations and the Sanskritization of Backward Castes." *Sociological Bulletin*, 33:(1-2).

Hannerz, Ulf, 1993. "The Withering Away of the Nation? An Afterword." *Ethnos*, 58:3-4.

Hardgrave, Robert L. Jr., 1984. "India on the Eve of Elections: Congress and the Opposition." *Pacific Affairs*, 57:3.

Hardiman, David, 1982. "The Indian 'Faction': A Political Theory Examined." *Subaltern Studies*, I.

Hechter, M., 1974. "The Political Economy of Ethnic Change." *American Journal of Sociology*, 79.

_____ and Levi, M., 1979. "The Comparative Analysis of Ethno-Regional Movements." *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 2.

Hettne, Bjorn, 1993. "Ethnicity and Development - An Elusive Relationship." *Contemporary South Asia*, 2:2.

Heuze-Brigant, Gerard, 1991. "Singrauli Super-Thermal Project: Heavy Investment and Social Havoc." *Social Action*, 41:3.

Hussain, Monirul, 1987. "Muslims of the Indian State of Assam: A Note." *Journal of the Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 8:2.

Inden, Ronald, 1986. "Orientalist Constructions of India." *Modern Asian Studies*, 20:3.

India Today. 1982. "Suspended Agony." (30 November)

_____, 1983. "Assam Elections: Come What May." (15 May)

_____, 1983. "Assam Elections: Can Democracy Survive Them?" (31 May).

_____, 1986. "Assam: The Endangered Accord." (15 March).

_____, 1990. "Assam: A Violent Mess. (15 September).

_____, 1990. "Assam: State of Strife." (31 December).

_____, 1991. "Assam: Elusive Peace." (31 March).

_____, 1991. "Assam: Wrong Move." (15 April).

_____, 1993. "Assam: Losing Business." (31 July).

Jeyaratnam Wilson, A., 1993. "The Politics of Ethnicity and Ethno-Nationalisms in South Asia." *Contemporary South Asia*, 2:3.

Kaviraj, Sudipta, 1992. "The Imaginary Institution of India." *Subaltern Studies*, VII.

Khokeid, Moshe, 1992. "An Anthropologist's Work Between Genres." *Ethnos*, 57:3-4.

Kirk-Greene, Anthony H.M., 1980. "'Damnosa Hereditas': Ethnic Ranking and the Martial Races Imperative in Africa." *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 3:4.

Kohli, Atul, 1983. "Regime Types and Poverty Reform in India." *Pacific Affairs*, 56:4.

Kothari, Rajni, 1964. "The "Congress System" in India." *Asian Survey*, 4.

Lakshmanan, Sabartatnam, 1986. "Internal Colonies and their Responses." *South Asia Bulletin*, 6:2.

Madan, T.N., 1987. "Secularism in its Place." *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 46:4.

Manor, James, 1996. "'Ethnicity' and Politics in India." *International Affairs*, 72:3.

Mayall, David, 1992. "The Making of British Gypsy Identities, c.1500-1980." *Immigrants and Minorities*, 11:1.

Miles, Robert, 1980. "Class, Race and Ethnicity: A Critique of Cox's Theory." *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 3:2.

Minault, Gail, 1984. "Some Reflections on Islamic Revivalism vs Assimilation among Muslims in India." *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 18:2.

Misra, Udayon, 1980. "Fresh Tension in Upper Assam Tea Belt." *Economic and Political Weekly*, (2 August).

_____, 1981. "Little Nationalism Turned Chauvinist: A Comment."*Economic and Political Weekly*, (21 February).

_____, 1984a. "Asom Sahitya Sabha: Retreat from Populist Politics." *Economic and Political Weekly*, (14 April).

_____, 1984b. "Remembering a Police Killing." *Economic and Political Weekly*, (28 April).

Moerman, Michael, 1965. "Ethnic Classification in a Complex Civilisation: Who are the Lue?" *American Anthropologist*, 67.

Morris-Jones, W.H., 1975. "Whose Emergency - India's or Indira's?" *The World Today*, Nov 1975.

Newman, Robert S., 1984. "Goa: The Transformation of an Indian Region." *Pacific Affairs*, 57:3.

Nielsen, F., 1985. "Towards a Theory of Ethnic Solidarity in Modern Societies." *American Sociological Review*, 50.

O'Hanlon, Rosalind, 1988. "Recovering the Subject: Subaltern Studies and Histories of Resistance in South Asia." *Modern Asian Studies*, 22:1.

_____ and Washbrook, David, 1992. "After Orientalism: Culture, Criticism and Politics in the Third World." *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 34:1.

Omvedt, Gail, 1991. "The Anti-Caste Movement and the Discourse of Power." *Race and Class*, 33:2.

Pandey, Rajendra, 1993. "Protective Discrimination for Backward Classes in India: Sociological and Legal Dimensions." *Research in Social Movements*, 16.

Parvathamma, C., 1973. "Ambedkar and After: The Position and Future of Indian Scheduled Caste Masses and Classes." *Eastern Anthropologist*, 26:3.

_____, 1986. "Role of Protest Movements in Social Transformation." *Guru Nanak Journal of Sociology*, 7:1.

Peers, Douglas, 1991. "'The Habitual Nobility of Being': British Officers and the Social Construction of the Bengali Army in the Early Nineteenth Century." *Modern Asian Studies*, 25:3.

Prabhakar M.S., 1972. "The Bongal Bogey." *Economic and Political Weekly*, (21 October).

Presler, Franklin A., 1983. "The Structure and Consequences of Temple Policy in Tamil Nadu, 1967-1981." *Pacific Affairs*, 56:2.

Quigley, Declan, 1991. "The Power of Imagination." *Modern Asian Studies*, 20:3.

Ram-Prashad, C., 1993. "Hindutva Ideology: Extracting the Fundamentals." *Contemporary South Asia*, 2:3.

Reetz, Dietrich, 1993. "Ethnic and Religious Identities in Colonial India (1920's-1930's): a Conceptual Debate." *Contemporary South Asia*, 2:2.

Rogers, John D., 1994. "Post-Orientalism and the Interpretation of Pre-Modern and Modern Political Identities: The Case of Sri Lanka." *Journal of Asian Studies*, 53:1.

Roychoudhury, Anil, 1981. "National Register of Citizens, 1951." *Economic and Political Weekly*, (21 February).

Rudolph, Lloyd I., 1983. "Establishing a Niche for Cultural Policy: An Introduction." *Pacific Affairs*, 56:1.

_____ and Rudolph, Susanne Hoeber, 1983. "Rethinking Secularism: Genesis and Implications of the Textbook Controversy, 1977-1979." *Pacific Affairs*, 56:1.

Samuel, John, 1993. "Language and Identity in North-East India." *Economic and Political Weekly*, (16-23 January).

Sharma, K.M., 1980. "Assam Question: A Historical Perspective" *Economic and Political Weekly*, (2 August).

Sharma, S.K., 1990. "Anti-Mandal Commission Report Agitation: Some Issues." *Guru-Nanak Journal of Sociology*, 11:2.

Singh, B.P., 1987. "North-East India: Demography, Culture and Identity Crisis." *Modern Asian Studies*, 21:2.

Singh, Jaswant, 1984. "Assam's Crisis of Citizenship." *Modern Asian Survey*, 24:10.

Soze, A.A.K., 1970. "Indian Muslims and the National Mainstream." *Indian Journal of Politics*, 4:1-2.

Talbot, Ian, 1994. "Planning for Pakistan: The Planning Committee of the All-India Muslim League 1943-1946." *Modern Asian Studies*, 28:4.

Thapar, Romila, 1989. "Imagined Religious Communities? Ancient History and the Modern Search for a Hindu Identity." *Modern Asian Studies*, 23:2.

Uplaonkar, A., 1992. "Scheduled Castes and Social Justice: A Karnataka Case in Point." *Indian Journal of Social Work*, 53:1.

Van den Berghe, Pierre L., 1983. "Class, race and ethnicity in Africa." *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 6:2.

Varshney, Ashutosh, 1993. "Contested Meanings: India's National Identity, Hindu Nationalism, and the Politics of Anxiety." *Daedalus*, 122:3.

Wood, John R., 1985. "Dividing the Jewel: Mountbatten and the Transfer of Power to India and Pakistan." *Pacific Affairs*, 58:4.

Newspapers and Journals

Assam Online (New Jersey)

Economic and Political Weekly (New Delhi)

Far Eastern Economic Review (Hong Kong)

India Today (New Delhi)

Keesings Record of World Events (London)

The Assam Tribune (Guwahati)

The Economic Times (Calcutta)

The Financial Times (London)

The Guardian (London)

The Hindu Online

The Hindustan Times (New Delhi)

The Indian Express (Bombay)

The Pioneer (Guwahati)

The Sentinel (Guwahati)

The Sunday Observer (New Delhi)

The Economic Times (Calcutta)

The Times (London)

The Times of India (Online News Service)